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Anti-Communist moving images and Cold War ideology: on the Malayan Film Unit

Wai Siam HEE

ABSTRACT The Malayan Film Unit (MFU), a film organization affiliated to the British colonial government, produced a large number of anti-communist films accompanied by multilingual recordings and commentaries. The ultimate goal of the MFU was to interpellate Malayan identity in order to eradicate the threat posed by communist ideology during the Cold War era. This article considers films made by the MFU alongside Cold War archival materials gathered from the UK and Singapore, and reportage on the MFU in the US, UK, and local newspapers of the time. It will explore how Malayan communists and Chinese New Villages settlers were represented in semi-realistic/semi-fictional moving images during the Cold War period. This article aims to reconsider the question of whether the aim of the MFU really was to hasten the end of empire, or if it was an extension of the imperialist machinery of state in South-East Asia.

KEYWORDS: Malaya; Malayan communists; Malayan Film Unit; Cold War; New Villages

In this country where communists are still engaged in an attack on the Government using terrorism and violence the fact is that you can be either a good Malayan or a communist. You cannot be both. (Gurney 1949, 21)

Malayan Film Unit

The Malayan Film Unit (MFU) was a film organization affiliated to the Department of Information of the British colonial government in Malaya. It was established in June 1946 with its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, and it closed in 1963 after the founding of Malaysia, changing its name to the National Film Department of Malaysia. It was established with three major aims: first, to help Malaysians of all races to understand ways of living together and the problems of other Malaysians; second, to combat illiteracy; third, to promote public education and information among all groups in the community, and to assist their progress towards self-

government (Malayan Film Unit 1953, 13). In its early years, it did not have a particularly strong anti-Communist emphasis. This lasted until the colonial government announced the Malayan Emergency in 1948, declaring martial law across Malaya to counter the Communists. The British High Commissioner at the time, Sir Henry Gurney (1898-1951), had long been aware of the lack of anti-Communist film material available for use in Malaya, and had expressed his dissatisfaction at this to the director of the MFU, H. W. Goven. In August 1949, the British colonial government's Department of Information called a regional conference of Information Officers in Singapore, proposing that "films were probably our most powerful propaganda weapon" (MacDonald 1949, 152). This proposal was strongly supported by Henry Gurney and the Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, Malcolm Macdonald. They fully agreed with the view that "the Chinese ... are highly susceptible to visual propaganda," and so resolved to increase the MFU's production of anti-Communist films for the South-East Asian media market (152).

Some time later, the British colonial government invited Stanley Hawes, the Producer-in-Chief with the Australian National Film Board, to propose a reorganization plan for the MFU. In this plan, Hawes stated that the reorganization of the MFU was urgent, and that the MFU needed to expand its scope of operations to concentrate mainly, though not entirely, on films for Asians (not only South-East Asians). The MFU had to produce films cheaply, simply and rapidly, while still paying attention to quality, requiring Western technicians and improved equipment. He also stressed that the propaganda function of the films could not be too blatant, as this would render them ineffective. He believed that the films should be recorded in the vernacular languages and designed to show the strength of the British Commonwealth of nations and the positive side of democratic government (Hawes 1950, 70).

The reorganization plan was supported and implemented by the colonial government. Between 1950 and 1960, the MFU became the largest documentary film producer in Asia, and was equipped with the most advanced film cameras, recording devices, and laboratories in Asia at the time. Films produced by the MFU were screened in 68 different countries, and 98 films were sold to distributors for broadcast on US/UK TV and public screening. Furthermore, virtually all the films were available in Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil versions (Malayan Film Unit 1963, 3). Other colonial organizations sent delegations to Kuala Lumpur in the hope of learning from and replicating the MFU's success. As reported in the *Sinchew Daily* of 16 May 1957, the Vietnamese government sent a delegation to visit the MFU, hoping to establish a similar organization in Vietnam ("Kaocha" 1957, 6).

During the Cold War, the MFU inculcated the Malayan people with the ideology of Anglo-American “modernization.” This was accomplished through a stream of propaganda and drama films, dubbed and captioned into different languages and dialects including Mandarin, Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay, Tamil and English. Major cinemas in Malaya were obliged to screen these films.¹ The ultimate aim was to interpellate Malayan people of all ethnicities, to create a Malayan consciousness and identity with which to resist and defeat the threat of Communist ideology. The multilingual nature of these films must not be misinterpreted as an acknowledgement of the value of these languages and dialects in the official nationalism of the day; rather, this was a strategy to allow this political propaganda to more effectively reach specified groups who could not understand English or Malay. The catalogue of MFU films reveals that many films were targeted at specific audiences (Rice 2013, 442). For example, some anti-Communist films are only available in Hakka. The target audience for these films was limited to Hakka groups in the countryside; they were not screened for Malay or Indian audiences.

In 1951, Henry Gurney was ambushed and shot dead on his way to the resort of Fraser’s Hill. In 1952, Sir Gerald Templer (1898-1979), a high-ranking military officer, arrived to take over as High Commissioner. Not long after assuming his post, Templer reassigned the director of MFU and brought in Tom Hodge from the Foreign Office as a replacement. Tom Hodge was previously the Film Advisor to the British Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, had headed up overseas film work for the Foreign Office, and had been director of the Films and Publications Division of British information services in New York (Loke 1974, 83). He was highly experienced in film work. After taking up his position in 1952, he produced an average of 60 films per year; 37 films were shown in 54 countries, both East and West, and some won awards at international film festivals. In 1956 alone, they earned Malaya over 500,000 Malayan dollars (Hodge 1957, 538). Sixty new films were sent to London for newsreel and television use in the UK and the USA (“Malayan Film Unit” 1955, 20).

Tom Hodge claimed that the MFU was “truly Malayan,” as the unit employed Chinese, Malay, and Indian people. Hodge served as MFU director until June 1957, when he was succeeded by Ow Kheng Law, who was Chinese. A Malay, Md. Zain Hussein, took on the role of Deputy Head and Associate Producer, while the three film directors serving under them were Malay, Chinese and Indian. A number of local employees also entered the MFU scriptwriting team (Hodge 1957, 539). In 1950, the MFU had only 27 employees, of which three were European and the rest Malay, Chinese, or Indian (“The Malayan Film Unit” 1950,

36). In 1955, the number of MFU employees had risen to 135, including 70 Malays, 30 Chinese people, 22 Indians, nice Eurasians, and four Europeans (“Presenting” 1955, 13).

Why were the films produced by the MFU so influential? In 1954 alone, cinemas across Malaya held as many as 6190 screenings of MFU films, in public cinemas and mobile cinemas which visited rural estates, schools and welfare organizations (“Malayan Film Unit” 1955, 20). As of 1953, the MFU films screened in public cinemas were all 35mm films; 16mm films were screened in the New Villages, rural estates, schools and welfare organizations using 93 mobile cinemas. The Malayan Federal Film Library held a collection of these films available to borrow or view. In 1953, an average of 1800 films per month were borrowed, and an estimated ten million Malaysians per year watched these films (Malayan Film Unit 1953, 12). In 1955, as many as 1340 films were screened in locations around the globe. Many copies were made in Australia, Canada, Germany, Egypt and South Vietnam from printing material supplied by the MFU (“Malayan Film Unit” 1955, 20). By 1963, 378 cinemas and 134 mobile cinemas were screening MFU films in Malaya (Malayan Film Unit 1963, 3).

From these numbers alone, it is clear that in the 1950s, the MFU created a Malayan national ethnicity on the silver screen for the first time, both for the Malayan people and the people of the world. Tom Hodge, interviewed by a film magazine in 1954, said that his task was to help build a nation out of the three racial groups in Malaya – Malay, Chinese and Indian (FH 1954, 5). He summarized the achievements of the MFU over the past decade, and stated with pride that the MFU had played a part in Malaya’s historical progress: its catalogue was a history of Malaya over the past ten years (Hodge 1957, 539). He announced that MFU films had laid a solid foundation for unity and harmony between the different ethnic groups of Malaya, making the goal of independence achievable. In addition, he claimed that the MFU had also helped to train Malaysians in the practices and standards of elections and census taking, and encouraged a sense of responsible citizenship (Hodge 1957, 539). After Hodge left his post, he was hired by the head of Cathay Loke Wan Tho to manage Cathay Keris in Singapore. He remained in this post until 1972, when this company ceased film production activities. One of the most emblematic MFU films is a 33-minute-long documentary on Malayan Independence Day, *Merdeka for Malaya* (1957). MFU was instructed to make the film by the government to capture the historic events, and it has become traditional for state TV to screen it on Malaysian Independence Day. In other words, in the mainstream narrative,

the MFU was a direct driving force behind the birth of Malaya and the creation of its independent historical discourse.

Hassan Abdul Muthalib in his essay, “The End of Empire: The Films of the Malayan Film Unit in 1950s British Malaya,” supports this notion, arguing that “The Malayan Film Unit had, undoubtedly, contributed immensely to the nation and, at the same time, carved a niche for itself in the making of acclaimed documentaries during the post-war and pre-Independence period,” and concluding that the MFU’s films were propaganda with the aim of furthering the end of empire (Muthalib 2010, 192-193). In a separate work, he argues that MFU films successfully won Malayan hearts and minds, thus hastening the end of empire (Muthalib 2009, 47-63). However, Muthalib tends to concentrate on Malay people’s positive reactions to political propaganda films (including MFU films), and does not deal with the feelings or reactions of other ethnicities. This disregard for the feelings of Chinese people, who made up nearly half of the population of Singapore and Malaya at the time, means that the assertion that the MFU films won “Malayan hearts and minds” lacks persuasiveness; one is led to wonder whether this statement is one born of ethnic nationalism alone. This article aims to reconsider the question of whether the aim of the MFU really was to hasten the end of empire, or if it was an extension of the imperialist machinery of state in South-East Asia.

Malayan communists and New Villages

The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was formed in 1930, but only started operations in 1932. Until 1941, the membership of the MCP was predominantly Chinese (Cheah 2012, 14). When, in 1941, the Japanese invaded and occupied Singapore and Malaya, UK forces retreated and instructed the MCP to form a “Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army” to conduct guerrilla warfare against the Japanese. This guerrilla force was trained and equipped by the British and welcomed members from different ethnicities, religions, classes and political creeds. Aborigines, Malays, Indians and other ethnicities were also represented in the guerrilla forces (Cheah 2012, 67). This multi-ethnic guerrilla army would later become the core of the post-war MCP militia, the “Malayan People’s Liberation Army.”

When the British reasserted control over Singapore and Malaya, they proclaimed the MCP an illegal organization and declared a “state of emergency,” which would last for 12 years. This “state of emergency” was a *de facto* war against the MCP, who refer to the period as the “Anti-British War of Independence.” The British avoidance of the term “war” brought them benefits in three major areas. Politically, as it was not a “war”, there was no need to

seek UK parliamentary approval and the Colonial Secretary could act as they saw fit; the British could avoid UN scrutiny and the restrictions of international law, helping to reduce the pressure of domestic and international public opinion. Second, there were economic benefits: as the country was not in a state of war, economic interests remained insurable, and rubber plantations and mines could continue operation in order to supply the UK homeland. Third, there were military benefits: as there was no “war,” the British could act as they wished, outside the limitations of international humanitarian law; military expenditure did not require parliamentary approval; and anti-communist brigades could use cruel and irregular means in order to complete their tasks (Chen 2012, xvii-xviii). The British used all available media organizations, including the MFU, to paint the Emergency as a Malayan Chinese rebellion. This claim grew so deep-rooted that it still influences historians of South East Asia to this day. For example, the Australian historian Milton Osborne believes that the Malayan Emergency “was essentially a Chinese rebellion against the existing government in which the Malays, the people of the country, played no part” (Osborne 1970, 89). This subtly racist discourse overlooks the existence of the 10th Regiment, commanded by the Malay Abdullah CD and made up of 400 Malay fighters at its peak. The 10th Regiment was formally established in 1949, commanded by Abdullah CD, who would be elected Chairman of the MCP in 1985 (Suriani 2005, 5).

In their propaganda, the MCP described their armed wing as the “Malayan National Liberation Army” in English; this was later altered to “Malayan Race Liberation Army” by colonial officials, who deliberately mistranslated the Chinese word for “nationality” (*minzu*) as “race.” This was a trick to whip up racism for their own ends, stereotyping the MCP as a racial organization made up entirely of Chinese people, not a national organization. A British author who once served in the police force in Malaya accused the MCP of being “in fact, an extension of the Communist Party in China; it was China, and not Malaya, with which they identified themselves” (Slimming 1969, 5). This claim borrows identity theory to grossly oversimplify and exaggerate the link between the MCP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), questioning whether Chinese people’s loyalties lay with Malaya or with China. It ultimately obscures the inconvenient political fact that the MCP’s goal was to promote the construction of a Malayan nationality through the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle. While talking with historians in his later years, Chin Peng clarifies that from the beginning of the Emergency in 1948 to the Baling talks in 1955, the MCP never received any aid from China or any other foreign country (Chin et al. 2012, 158). It is clear that at least in the period from 1948 to 1955 the MCP should not be regarded as an overseas branch of the CCP. In *My*

Side of History, Chin Peng states that after the Second World War, MCP members of Chinese origin no longer regarded themselves as “Overseas Chinese,” but as “local Malayan Chinese: Our loyalties were to Malaya, not China” (Chin, Ward, and Miraflor 2003, 272-302). These statements from one of the key players in the MCP should be sufficient proof that MCP members did not have a single monolithic identity.

In order to disrupt rural Chinese support for the MCP, the British colonial government implemented the “Briggs’ Plan” in 1950. Using a mixture of encouragement and coercion, around 100,000 rural dwellers, including around 40,000 Chinese people, were moved from illegal rudimentary homes to the “New Villages,” surrounded on all sides by barbed wire. The village inhabitants were subject to food rationing and 24-hour “concentration camp style” checks on entering or leaving, but were also provided with modern public welfare services, such as medical treatment and education. After the pain of relocation, this gave the rural Chinese people a taste of the benefits of cooperation. Gradually, they began to cooperate with anti-Communist policies, and stopped providing aid to the MCP. The leader of the MCP, Chin Peng, admitted in his memoir *My Side of History* that the Briggs’ Plan was a key factor in the defeat of the MCP. The military plans of the MCP began to fail primarily because their supply of food from rural Chinese people was cut off. The MCP fighters in the jungle were left half-starving, which sapped their fighting morale (Chin, Ward, and Miraflor 2003, 272-302).

If one says that the “Brigg’s Plan” was a physical tactic of the British colonial government, then the films of the MFU constituted an anti-Communist mental tactic, aimed at calling up the national identity of Malayan Chinese people. The MFU produced a number of films featuring the New Villages, such as *A New Life: Squatter Resettlement* (1951), *Our New Home* (1952), and *Proudly Presenting Yong Peng* (1953). These films exaggerated the modern facilities of the New Villages and the happiness of their inhabitants. Government propaganda bodies repeatedly screened MFU films for free in New Villages across the country. These screenings would also feature Hollywood films and Chinese crosstalk. Sometimes they would even include live song and dance performances, MFU-produced Chinese language patriotic songs, and folk dances. Free food and drink was provided, along with prize games, to entice people to come and watch the films.

Newspapers also featured letters from New Village inhabitants. In 1953, a resident of a New Village near Kuala Lumpur sent a letter to a newspaper stating that 98% of New Village residents could not read or write English, and they all loved watching MFU films dubbed into local languages and dialects. As there was no cinema in the New Village, in the

past the inhabitants had to go to a nearby city to watch films. However, since the MFU's mobile cinemas came to the New Village, the villagers had been greatly impressed by the range of British and Malayan news films, cartoons, documentaries, and Western films, such as *Tarzan* (1951), that were screened. The man who wrote the letter said that although he enjoyed Western films like *Tarzan*, the MFU films were very striking in both quality and sound. Although he had not had the opportunity to travel widely, MFU films had taken the beautiful scenery of the world outside into the New Villages, and for this he was grateful (New Villager 1953, 10).

Others had different memories of MFU films. In her award-winning US-published memoirs, Malaysian-born American scholar Shirley Geok-Lin Lim remembers that when she watched films in her youth in Malaya, the cinema would screen compulsory newsreels related to the Emergency before the film began. After repeatedly seeing Chinese Communists faces flash up on the silver screen, as a Malayan Chinese-*Peranakan*, she learned to hate Chinese Communists, and regard herself as a Malayan child. For her, "Chinese identity...[was]... synonymous with Chinese chauvinism (Lim 1996, 40).

Evidently, MFU film screenings in the 1950s did much to shape Chinese people's collective visual identification with Malayanization policies, and their national imagining of "Malaya" as their new home. In the end, this led to the collective rejection of the MCP. This is an issue that must be tackled in research on MCP writings, Malayan local consciousness in the 1950s, or Chinese identity. However, domestic and foreign research on MCP writings and other Malayan Chinese issues has tended to approach the tangled knot of MCP writings, Malayan local consciousness, national identity, and Chinese identity by focusing on text-centred "Malayan Chinese literature" or Malayan Chinese periodicals. By contrast, there is a lack of research considering the complications and evolution of MCP writings, Malayan local consciousness, national identity, and Chinese identity from a film/visual mass broadcast perspective. In the past, Malayan Chinese society was made up of a large number of illiterate people, who could not develop local consciousness or national identity from reading "Malayan Chinese literature" or Malayan Chinese periodicals. These MFU films, described as "embryonic Malayan 'national cinema'" (Mak 2011, 27), were moving images dubbed into various Chinese dialects; it is actually these films which were the conduit by that the majority of Malayan Chinese people grew to accept local consciousness and national identity.

Anti-Communist moving image and Cold War ideology

After martial law was declared in 1948, the British colonial government immediately announced a policy of “Malayanization.” On the surface, this policy was aimed at bringing about the integration of all ethnic cultures, but in reality the main aim was to “defeat the communists and win support from the Chinese community” (Oong 2000, 139). The MFU’s anti-Communist films were a “product” of this sweeping Malayanization policy. Between the Second World War and Malayan Independence, MFU films were produced and screened in vast numbers across Singapore and Malaya, with at least 400 works being made. In 1953, the catalogue of MFU films contained only 50 films; by 1959, this had increased to 441. The 1959 MFU film catalogue placed the films into 19 categories. Of these, category 2, “Armed Services,” category 3, “Armed Forces,” category 6, “Communications,” category 9, “Emergency,” and category 14, “Police” all directly touched upon anti-Communist themes. In the 1963 catalogue, there were 20 types of film content explanation that directly represented anti-Communist themes; this is without including all the early anti-Communist films.

During Templer’s term as High Commissioner, the MFU director Tom Hodge received an order to give special prominence to each film that featured Templer. Hodge would personally approve the cut of every single MFU film (Muthalib 2010, 194). The Templer shown in MFU films was amiable and approachable, all smiles as he shook hands with the people, a hero of Malaya (Muthalib 2010, 183-184). Actually, Templer was renowned for his cruelty and autocratic tendencies. Accused of war crimes by Chin Peng, this “anti-Communist hero” offered public rewards for the heads of MCP members, and permitted British troops to pose for photos with severed heads, tying the corpses to the backs of their trucks and driving around to intimidate the people. These actions were criticized by the left-wing British press at the time, but Templer defended his actions by saying they were tactically necessary in order to enable British troops to identify MCP members (Chin 2003, 302-307).

From 1947 onwards, nearly all MFU films had a narrator who would explain the events on screen in a voice-over (Muthalib 2010, 184). This perspective, which only enables one-way communication, was widely used to promote the policies and achievements of the colonial government. In the voice-overs, MCP members were described as “terrorists” or “bandits.” The technique of binary opposition is also frequently seen in these films: “the films would begin with a visual representation of the wrong way to do something. The negative results would be revealed and then the whole situation would be re-enacted, showing

the correct procedures” (Muthalib 2010, 184). In the end, the government would have to step in and return the situation to normal.

The 1951 documentary *A New Life: Squatter Resettlement*, only available in English and Hakka versions, re-presents the birth of the New Village Kampung Bukit Pisang: Layang and Rengam in Johor state. The director and cinematographer was A. Peter Amavasi. The film opens with a high angle extreme long shot of the jungle, with the voice-over telling the audience that MCP terrorists are hiding in this very area. At the time, the majority of the people living in illegal rudimentary houses on the edge of the jungle across Malaya were Chinese. The voice-over says that these rural Chinese people are being seriously threatened by the terrorists of the MCP, who steal their hard-won food. This visual language erases those people who voluntarily aided the MCP. The intention behind this erasure is to set up a binary opposition between the MCP and their protective cushion of sympathetic rural dwellers, and to stress that the MCP are the oppressors and the rural people the oppressed. This hints to the audience in subtle visual language that aiding the MCP is the wrong course of action: it is tantamount to standing with the oppressor and subjecting even more innocent people to their harassment.

In order to protect the safety of these rural Chinese people, the voice-over provides the government’s solution: the New Villages scheme. This involves the compulsory resettlement of all illegal squatters to New Villages far away from the jungle. The voice-over enumerates all the benefits of moving to the New Villages. The authorities will provide lorries to move residents’ possessions and take them to the New Villages. The head of every household will receive a 30 Malayan dollar construction material subsidy and a weekly 3 Malayan dollar allowance for five months. Guided by foreign experts, the villagers manage to get materials at a low price, building wooden houses themselves and planting the ground around the New Village. Here, food is better and more plentiful than before, and they have police protection. Before the wooden houses are constructed, the villagers temporarily sleep together in a long house. The voice-over announces that usually, the wooden houses can be built and inhabited in just a few days. Later, the long house becomes a school for the villagers’ children. Several scenes show children happily attending class in a Chinese language school. The New Village has a daily bus service to take villagers to the nearest city. There is also a New Village Cooperative (here an extreme close-up is used, magnifying these words), run by a Chinese boss to provide the villagers with cheap everyday necessities. The village also contains a “government pharmacy” (again, an extreme close-up is used to display these words), with the voice-over announcing that this is the first time in their lives that these

people have gained timely medical care. The villagers are also persuaded to take part in the self-defence militia of the New Villages (unpaid), being trained how to use guns and to protect the village against MCP aggression.

This film attempts to represent how happy Chinese villagers will be in the New Villages. A full shot is used to show a family of several children sitting around a table. The mother is cooking to one side, while an old lady washes clothes. Then, a medium shot represents a girl leisurely combing her hair in her bedroom mirror. Boys, naked to the waist, are playing volleyball on a vacant piece of ground. With guidance from a foreign expert, the villagers are able to more efficiently raise chickens and pigs (there are several close-ups of pig heads and pig rears, suggesting that this film would likely not have been screened for Muslim Malays). Free from MCP terrorist harassment, they are able to secure a good price for their livestock at market, earning a sizable income. To finish, there is a sequence of long shots of a family happily sitting down together to eat, while the voice-over says that this family can finally eat peacefully without the threat of terror hanging over them. The children lick their bowls in satisfaction. The voice-over says that this proves that the New Villages plan is bound to succeed, and MCP terrorism will gradually become a forgotten bad dream. This extra-diegetic conclusion leads the audience to understand that people threatened by the MCP have finally found peace and prosperity by submitting to and cooperating with government policy, opening a new page in their lives.

Like other MFU films on the New Villages, this film conceals the numerous problems in the New Villages scheme, and the damage the scheme caused. As the New Villages were built hurriedly by the government, on occasion the wrong area or wrong land was chosen, meaning that some villagers had to move multiple times to different New Villages and there was a severe shortage of land for planting. Elderly people who no longer had the strength for rubber tapping were left in grave difficulty. Facilities were also severely lacking,

The recurring complaints of villagers themselves were malaria and lack of access to dispensaries, chemists, licensed food shops, bus services and vegetable land, especially for the old who were unable to tap rubber. The average rural Chinese person was not only threatened by terrorism, but “subject to economic pressures at the narrow margin above the bare subsistence at which he lives” (Harper 1999, 178).

Although the settlers were given a short-term government subsidy, this could only be used at specific government shops (Rice 2010), and was of no help to unemployed people trying to feed their families. The resettlement programme resulted in half of the adult resettled population becoming unemployed (Harper 1999, 179). This is a startling statistic, and one that proves that the New Villages project was a failure in its implementation. This failure in turn caused a range of family problems, societal problems and national problems, which persist to the present day.

The trials of the Chinese people in the New Villages encapsulated the problems of lower and middle class Chinese people across Malaya in microcosm. Out of self-protection, Chinese people eventually became drawn to a type of communalism, with limited faith in government or nation. However, these Chinese people were not “anti-government.” The inescapable screenings of MFU films successfully created an enduring structure, similar to the “anticommunism-pro-Americanism” creed current in Taiwan and South Korea at the time: “according to the ideological fantasy generated by the structure, being anti-government was equivalent to being Communist...” (Chen 2010, 7-8). During the Cold War era, Chinese people were presented with a dichotomous choice: to be “either a good Malayan or a communist...” (Gurney 1949, 21). They had no choice but to become a “Malayan”; the question of whether they could become a “good Malayan” became the sole criterion of Chinese people’s political loyalty for their rulers. Some scholars researching the topic have concluded that the New Villages were “discarded orphans of the mainstream of national progress”: the government tended to focus on developing Malay villages, while poor Chinese people were generally concentrated in the New Villages (Lin and Song 2000, 49-78). When one revisits the New Village films shot by the MFU today, hears the fine promises made by the voice-over actor representing the voice of government, and compares these promises to the half-century of ugly reality which follows, it is impossible not to be reminded of an unpaid historical debt owed to the villagers.

A New Life: Squatter Resettlement was produced by the director of the MFU, B. H. Hipkins. Past employees of the MFU have revealed in interview that after Templer’s appointment in 1952, he soon sacked Hipkins in favour of Tom Hodge as he did not like the films Hipkins produced (Muthalib 2010, 194). Under Hodge’s leadership, MFU films began to gradually incorporate more scenes of characters conversing on screen, moving away from the old style of a voice-over actor monopolizing the narration. However, the films of this period continued to repeat the same narrative model: “the plot would begin with the protagonist faced with a problem; in the middle, he would face tribulations; a solution would

then be offered to him by a third party (representing the authorities), and it would all end happily when the subject accepts the solution.” (Muthalib 2010, 185).

The film *The Knife*, released in November 1952, pioneered the above narrative model. This film was available in Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English versions. The director was Ow Kheng Law, who later became head of the MFU in 1957. The film opens with tense background music. A hand, shown in close-up, holds a Malay knife (*keris*), shown in extreme close-up. It is powerfully stabbed into the ground as the words “Based on a true story” appear on the screen. Then, there is a high angle extreme long shot of the jungle, as in *A New Life: Squatter Resettlement*, and the voice-over tells the viewers that MCP terrorists are hidden in the jungle and pose a serious threat to the property of the people of Malaya. The opening segment reveals the source of the problem clearly. The jungle is filmed from top to bottom from a crane. At the bottom, the audience sees a civil militia organized by the government. Two male protagonists are part of the militia, and are patrolling the jungle with guns. This reveals the third-party ruler’s solution to the problem. The scene cuts to a state official speaking Malay, who is publicly rewarding these two militia members for killing three MCP terrorists. These two Malays, Mansoh and Osman, are the protagonists of the film. The scene and the sound then changes through a dissolving effect. The film is hinting to the audience that they are being shown the past events leading up to their reward. This kind of flashback narration is rarely found in earlier MFU films.

An extra-diegetic voice says that these two men are good friends who live together in a Malay village. The director uses a long take to show the audience Mansoh, who has just finished his militia shift, carrying a gun and whistling happily. He arrives at Osman’s wooden house and invites Osman out to a paddy field to hunt wild pigeons. Just before leaving, Mansoh suddenly remembers that he has forgotten his *keris*. A Malay woman then emerges from the house and passes a *keris* to Osman. Osman says that he will wear it on his waist. The two men shoot some wild pigeons, but the birds fall into the jungle. The men run into the jungle to retrieve their quarry, but are surrounded by three Communist bandits who steal their guns and abduct them. They arrive at a river, and the Communists try to cross using a trunk bridge, but this breaks. In the ensuing panic, Mansoh signals to Osman. Osman draws the *keris* and stabs one of the Communists. On their return to the village, they immediately inform the police, and help the army track down the Communists in the jungle. When they eventually find them, the troops open fire and kill all three. Mansoh and Osman happily recover their guns from the corpses.

Then, the scene again dissolves, hinting that the audience is being returned to the present, at the prize-giving ceremony. The Malay state official continues his address in the Malay language. The government greatly appreciates the way that these two warriors provided information to the police and army that resulted in the elimination of three Communist bandits, and so they are given 5000 Malayan dollars each. The voice-over also states that the two warriors were rewarded and commended within 24 hours of the bandits being killed. Finally, an ascending high angle shot is used to show the two warriors stepping forward and saluting the state official. This high angle shot tells the audience that these Malay boys are true anti-Communist heroes, and should be admired and studied. This is the only way in which problems can be solved and everyone can live happily together.

Compared with other MFU films, this film shows a greater use of visual language in its cinematography and editing. That year, it was selected for the Edinburgh Film Festival and was also featured in the media. In his own writings, Tom Hodge enjoys boasting of the high quality of these MFU films, their success at international film festivals, and their equality to Western films (“Malaiya sheyingzu” 1956, 6). However, over half of the award-winning films won their awards at the South-East Asian Film Festival (later the Asian Film Festival). These festivals, initiated and guided by the Japanese in the 1950s, had a strong anti-Communist flavour. MFU was the representative of the Singapore and Malaya film industry, and as its director Tom Hodge was entitled to take part and take turns in hosting it. He also helped the British colonial government formulate relevant policy measures. John Behague, a reporter at the *Sunday Times*, wrote a mocking article entitled “This is your film star, Mr. Hodge.” The article observed that although a certain amount of inspiration had gone into *The Knife*, cinemagoers do not go to the cinema to see the “official point of view.” To be successful, film propaganda must be buoyant and exhilarating (Behague 1952, 13). In another article, he directly questioned whether the MFU had the ability to make propaganda films that could rival those produced in the UK and US, as the MFU was scared that if it portrayed characters realistically, the characters obedience to government orders would look ludicrous. Furthermore, the films were completely lacking in a sense of humour. Behague called on the British colonial government to enlist an independent organization to make propaganda films, because a classic propaganda film could only be made without government control and interference (Behague 1953, 13). These criticisms sparked a response from Tom Hodge, who said that MFU films could not be compared with those produced by UK or US organizations, as those enjoyed the services of highly paid and very experienced personnel. He also asked

rhetorically whether any film body affiliated to government would not want to reflect the government's political position (Hodge 1953, 13).

The Cold War ideology radiated by *The Knife* both on- and off-screen is worthy of much consideration. The director Ow Kheng Law worked for the government between 1937 and 1945.² After the war, he served in the British colonial organization Crown Film Unit (Rice 2013, 447). He understood the ruler's needs perfectly and strove to accommodate them. The MFU's most famous work, *Merdeka for Malaya*, was directed by Ow. When the MFU closed in 1963, he was appointed to be the first head of the national TV station RTM. "High class" Chinese people such as Ow, people who spoke perfect English, constituted the upper layers of the Chinese community in Malaya. In the 1950s, they formed a political alliance with Malay and Tamil elites to win Malayan "independence" in 1957 with the tacit help of the British colonial government. This ideology of independence, formed in the Cold War through collaborative colonialism (Law 2009, 9-29), acknowledged "Malay sovereignty" as the core structure of the Malayan nationality, something expressed in Ow Kheng Law's *The Knife*.

Although Ow Kheng Law was Chinese, he skilfully abstracted the *keris*, symbolizing "Malay sovereignty," in order to counter the MCP members, who were all Chinese. Without the *keris*, the two Malay warriors would not have been able to triumph. From a narratological perspective, the *keris* is the game-changing "magical agent." The "donor" who provides this agent is a Malay woman who emerges from Osman's home, symbolizing the begetter of the Malay mother culture providing the protagonist with the means to escape a crisis.³ The director effectively combines the *keris*, a culturally fetishized sign among local Malay groups, with the Cold War ideology of Western colonial film in order to fight the MCP. This differs from previous MFU films, which only emphasized the British colonial government's use of modern Western science and military power to eliminate MCP members and did not manage to effectively incorporate local Malay cultural signs and call on the Malays, recognized by the colonial government as the "original inhabitants" of the country, to fight the MCP.

In other words, this film creates a binary opposition between "Malays" and "Chinese MCP members," splitting them into "inside" and "outside." The Malays and their village life, symbolizing an aboriginal, prelapsarian state, are on the inside and threatened by a menacing external force. The MCP members, illegally camped in the forest, are the representation of this external force. The film argues that the drive to solve and eliminate this external force should not come solely from the British colonial government; local Malays, too, can find the symbolic capital to resist this external force from within their own Malay culture. In the film,

this symbolic capital is the *keris*; in historical reality, it was the combination of the Malay nationalist discourse of “Malay sovereignty” and Muslim faith. In the 1948 Federation of Malaya Agreement, the British colonial government accepted the discourse of Malay sovereignty and acknowledged Malay Bumiputra privileges, including the installation of Islam as the official religion and Malay as the official language. This film, through its depiction of the Malay state official praising the two Malay warriors in Malay, strengthened the Malay nationalist discourse of “Malay sovereignty,” even though at the time Malaya was still under British colonial control.

The film also reinforced the government’s consistent racial stereotyping, which was given a further boost by Cold War ideology. The MCP members were all Chinese, and no Malays were involved with them. The MCP was “racialized” as a Chinese-only political pressure movement, masking the historical involvement of Malays in forming the “Tenth Regiment” of the MCP. Given communism’s opposition to religion, Malays who joined the MCP were branded by the British propaganda machine as heretics who had turned their backs on Islam. Racist discourse was employed to attack them for joining a Chinese organization; it was even insinuated that they were not true Malays. A 10-minute MFU short, *Imam Sermon* (1952), only available in Malay, uses an imam’s address to a group of Malays to enumerate the ways in which Communism goes against the tenets of Islam (Muthalib 2010, 187). However, later scholars researching these Malay MCP cadres have discovered that they never abandoned their Islamic faith. During the armed struggle, they would carry out their religious duties as soon as conditions permitted. They also led villagers in building mosques. These cadres thus represented a combination of Communism, nationalism, internationalism and Islam (Lamry 2006, 193-194). Abdullah CD once explained that

The MCP believed in religious freedom and respect for the customs of all ethnicities. I was born a Muslim and grew up surrounded by Islamic teachings. No matter where I go, this faith will never change [...] As for Islam, the MCP recognizes it as our country’s national religion. (Abdullah 2007, 12-19).

The multi-ethnic nature of the MCP is shown through Abdullah CD’s marriage to fellow MCP fighter Ying Min-Qin in 1955. Ying converted to Islam for the marriage, and changed her name to Suriani Abdullah. Both before and after her marriage, Ying Min-Qin studied hard

to learn Malay and Jawi, and familiarize herself with Malay customs. She also taught Malay comrades about the *Communist Manifesto*, Lenin's *The State*, and Mao Zedong's *On Practice*, *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*, and *Combat Liberalism in Malay* (Ying 2007, 91-105). In addition to Chinese people, the ranks of the MCP contained Malays, Indians and Thais. The MCP also stipulated that all troops must celebrate the traditional festivals of all ethnic groups in the army, allocating dedicated funds for this purpose (Ying 2007, 92). Clearly, the multi-ethnic characteristics of the MCP organization have long been hidden by the British.

The MFU produced a number of anti-Communist films aimed at Malays, including Malaya's first Malay language drama *Abu Nawas* (1957), proving that the colonial government had indeed realized the attraction of Communism for Malays. MFU employee Loong Hin Boon, responsible for translating the dialogue into Chinese, recalled in interview that although the film was finished in 1954, the fact that all MCP members in the film were Chinese and all Malays were victims of MCP violence, was felt to be too sensitive for Malayan Chinese people at the time. Therefore, the film's release was delayed until 1957 (Muthalib 2010, 195). Nearly all MFU anti-Communist films reinforce the stereotype that MCP members were all Chinese, and other ethnicities were their victims. The historical Malay voices in the MCP organization are absent from MFU films. In any case, MFU Malay documentaries were enthusiastically received by Malays, especially in Malay villages. They did not know that these documentaries contained fictional elements, just like the dramas they had seen in the cinema (Muthalib 2010, 182).

Put simply, the images of the MCP represented by the MFU all reproduce three stereotypes. First, that virtually all MCP members were Chinese, with faces that were either terrifying or indistinct. Their faces were hardly ever shown in close-up, with high-angle or full-shot scenes being used instead. Second, the MCP members in the films are not agents of speech. They barely talk, and do not smile. Unless they are surrendering in dejection, the director does not allow them to say any more than necessary in front of the camera. Third, the MCP members are always referred to as "bandits" or "communist terrorists," whether they are in or out of shot. When in shot, they are portrayed as being completely unreasonable, violent and brutal. These three stereotyped images were inescapable at the time, being represented all over Malaya through films, publications, and other media. This not only helped to mould the popular imagination of the MCP during the Cold War, but ultimately also planted fear and resistance to the MCP in the minds of the public.

After Malayan independence in 1957, Malayan Chinese students studying in the UK refused to screen MFU films at an assembly, only screening films made by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This caused Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman great displeasure. During his Independence Day address to the country in 1958, he specifically criticized these Chinese students, saying that nowhere in the world could a Chinese person be more happy and prosperous than in Malaya, and saying that he was willing to let Communist-sympathizing students watch CCP films, as this was the only way they could know just how fortunate they were to be a Malayan student (“Modikari” 1958, 9). After Malayan independence in 1957, the MFU passed under the control of the Malayan government. However, it continued to use the same name, and continued to make anti-Communist films. Even after changing its name in 1963 to the “National Film Department of Malaysia,” it still retained the leaping tiger logo used by the MFU in the opening credits of its films, and the MFU’s Cold War nationalist ideology and anti-communist dogma remained unchanged.

Conclusion

The greatest criticism of MFU films is that they implemented the British colonial government’s long-term racist “divide and rule” policy, causing divisions between Malaya’s three major ethnic groups. The majority of Malays in the films live in villages, and farm the land. Chinese people are mostly urban merchants, MCP members or labourers in the New Villages. Most Indians live on rural estates, tapping rubber.

From examining the titles and summaries in the MFU film catalogues, it is evident that while not every film directly touches on anti-Communist topics, they are at their most effective when they are not directly promoting anti-Communist ideology, but representing the various benefits of a modern Anglo-American capitalist free market economy, scientific medicine and democratic elections.

Tu Wei-Ming has observed that, in the 1950s, “The US began to replace ‘Westernization’ with ‘modernization.’ This throws up the question of what ‘modernity’ is” (Tu 2000, 20). The MFU film catalogues perfectly embody the way in which in the middle of the last century Anglo-American capitalism exaggerated Cold War era working class happiness and the harmonious relations between labour and capital through the ideology of modernization. The first category in the 1959 MFU film catalogue, “Agriculture and Forestry,” and the twelfth, “Industry and Labour” promote how the British colonial government used a “modern” capitalist free market economy and technology to develop the

Malayan rubber, manufacturing and forestry industries, bringing prosperity to all. The seventh category, “Elections,” contains 12 films. These vigorously promote the ways in which the British colonial government helped the Malayan people understand and implement a “modern” system of democratic elections in pursuit of the values of equality and democracy. The eighth category, “Education and Youth,” and the eleventh, “Health,” feature films that impress upon viewers the message that “modern” scientific medicine and education have benefited all the people of Malaya (Malayan Film Unit 1959).

Current scholars believe that the construction of a Malayan nationality at that time was centred on Malayan nationalism, and lacked a “modern clear goal, i.e. the pursuit of individual equality and liberation” (Khor 2009, 109). Actually, this modern clear goal of equality and liberation was outlined by MFU films, using a capitalist democratic system and a free market economy. This defeated the Communist vision of one party rule and a planned economy on the psychological battlefield, and influenced and inspired common people of all races. MFU films provided the Malayan people with a complete modern value system, including Anglo-American nationalist solutions. Under this value system, Malayan nationalism, guided by Malay sovereignty, was implied to be the only and best guaranteed solution for the problems faced by all the ethnicities in Malaya. Consequently, Communism and other left-wing thoughts were demonized as running counter to or threatening the collective dream of the Malayan people to rise up in pursuit of “modernization” and “one nationality.” However, it is strange that while these films repeatedly promote the ideology of nationalism to unite all ethnicities, they also use racist “divide and rule” strategies to demonize Chinese people as MCP terrorists, placing the identity of Malaysia Chinese people into an isolated and enlightened quandary.

Mainstream academia believes that MFU films paved the way for Malaysian national cinema. This article argues instead that these films, tinged with racism, cannot be considered part of a true national cinema, resembling more Cold War films in a broad sense. At best, they were a South-East Asian extension of imperialist ideological state apparatuses, guided by Cold War Anglo-American imperialism. These films caused a change in the identity of Malayan Chinese people, whether coercive or unconscious, and planted seeds of racism in the politics of Malaysia, which remain there to this day.

Notes

¹ According to Tom Hodge, this instruction was issued in imitation of measures announced by the British colonial government in India. All cinemas also had to pay for the screenings. This brought the MFU an annual income of over 300,000 Malayan dollars (“You may be” 1953, 3). At the time, this measure sparked strong opposition in the Singaporean media. The Cathay organization and the Shaw Brothers both opposed the compulsory screenings for going against the normal practices of film distribution (Free Press Staff Reporter 1953, 3). Some readers also wrote letters to the newspapers expressing their opposition and calling on the Singapore government not to follow the Malayan Federation in requiring cinemas to screen the films. This measure was an infraction on individual rights, and also damaged the happy and harmonious relationship built up between the government and film intellectuals (Individualist 1953, 10).

² Ow Kheng Law was born on 28 December 1919 in Perak, Malaya, and completed his education at the Penang Free School (“Diانشi bumen” 1963, 21).

³ For more on the “magical agent” and “donor” in narratology, see Propp (1975, 39, 79-83).

Special term

Minzu 民族

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