# Searching for Identities: Lau Kek Huat's Films and Memories of the Malayan Communist Struggle

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two films by the Chinese Malaysian filmmaker Lau Kek Huat—*Absent Without Leave* (2017) and *Boluomi* (2019)—and discusses how they scrutinise memories of the Malayan Communist Party's struggle while confronting the official, state-sanctioned version, which is intertwined with ethnic-based, preferential practices espoused by the ruling regime. Furthermore, these films interrogate ethnic Chinese Malayan identities—including the communists' identities in particular—by highlighting their pluralism, as torn between Chinese and Malayan nationalism. Through this analysis, I argue that these films also reflect an "authorial intention" to locate and negotiate his diasporic ethnic Chinese identity vis-à-vis Malaysia's ethnocentric socio-political system. Lau has endeavoured to pluralize the memories of the communist struggle, perpetuating the contestation for the Emergency's meanings and legacies to enable the emergence of new identities and political subjectivities that challenge the dominant nation-building discourse and ethnic politics of Malaysia.

**KEYWORDS** *Absent Without Leave, Boluomi,* Chinese Malaysian, Lau Kek Huat, Malayan Communist Party, memory

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## Introduction

In February 2017, the documentary *Absent Without Leave* (不即不離, henceforth *Absent*), directed by Lau Kek Huat (廖克發), was banned by the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia for "having elements which may be negative for national development" after it was submitted for the Malaysia International Film Festival. *Absent* chronicles the history of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP, sometimes also referred to as the Communist Party of Malaya) struggle in what was then known as Malaya by featuring interviews with ex-communists. Cinema screenings and digital video disc (DVD)-format distribution were not permitted in Malaysia because of the ban. In protest, the production company held a special screening event on Facebook, and the documentary was made available free of charge for a week on YouTube ("Award-winning M'sian Film").

In this documentary, the Malaysian-born, Taiwan-based Lau tries to trace his family history, especially that of his grandfather, who was mysteriously absent from the family narrative. In combing through his family stories, the documentary slowly reveals that his grandfather was involved in the MCP's struggle in Malaya. The documentary later tries to give a more complete account of the communist history by interviewing exiled ex-communists residing outside Malaysia.[1] Prior to its ban, the film had a limited theatrical release in Taiwan and was featured in several international film festivals, including the 2016 Singapore International Film Festival, where it won the Audience Choice Award. However, in Malaysia, the film was banned by state authorities, along with other prior MCP-themed films such as *The Last Communist* (dir. Amir Muhammad, 2006) and *The New Village* (dir. Wong Kew Lit, 2013), for allegedly reviving communism and worshiping communist leaders.

Lau and his production company denied that the documentary intended to glorify the MCP and communism. Instead, they argued that they intended the film to be a bridge for dialogue between the oppositional entities which suffered equally during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60)[2] so that the wounds could be healed,

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[1] Malaya achieved its independence from the British on 31 August 1957. Malaysia, consisting of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak, was formed on 16 September 1963. Singapore separated from Malaysia and became a sovereign country on 9 August 1965.

[2] The MCP formed its Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA) and launched its armed insurrection in 1948 when a state of Emergency was declared by the British, one that eventually lasted for twelve years. The armed confrontations between the two belligerents cost tens of thousands of lives, including those of civilians. Further hostilities would persist even after the Emergency until the MCP's disbandment in 1989.

and reconciliation made possible ("Penerbit Filem"). Ironically, the restrictions and suppression of discussion and debate on the MCP's role in nation-building by the right-wing Barisan Nasional regime are more detrimental to national development than the film itself could be. This was not Lau's only brush with censorship. His first feature film, *Boluomi* (菠蘿蜜 jackfruit, 2019), which he co-directed with Vera Chen (陳雪甄, also the director of acting), was also banned in Malaysia. The film juxtaposed the story of a mother and her son during the Emergency with that of a relationship between a male Malaysian student and a Filipino female worker in Taiwan in the 2000s. The content was deemed damaging the national harmony and tarnishing the government's sovereignty.

This paper focuses on *Absent* and *Boluomi*, discussing how these films scrutinise memories, in their metaphorical sense, of the Malayan communist struggle while confronting the official memory intertwined with the ethnocentric practices of the regime. Furthermore, these films interrogate the question of ethnic Chinese identities, particularly those of the Malayan communists, which I argue were torn between a nationalism directed towards the perceived motherland (i.e., China) and their actual place of settlement (i.e., Malaya). The long-term result of this bifurcation extends to contemporary Chinese Malaysians, against whom the communist struggle has been employed as a political excuse to justify the curbing of their political rights in order to cement the primacy of the ethnic Malays, who are officially considered indigenous. These two films are Lau's efforts to locate and negotiate his own ethnic Chinese identity in confronting the ethnocentric system in Malaysia.

## Challenging the Official Discourse on the Communist Struggle

Lau was born and grew up in Sitiawan, Perak, the birthplace of Ong Boon Hua (王文華, alias "Chin Peng"), the MCP's long-serving Secretary-General, and a site of significant communist activities during the Emergency. He pursued a business administration degree at the National University of Singapore and worked as a Chinese-language teacher in a Singaporean primary school for four years. He later left his job and studied filmmaking at the National Taiwan University of Arts, working as a videographer for National Geographic and making short films during his period of study.

Lau is part of a new generation of Malaysian cultural workers who have benefited from the more relaxed and liberal cultural sphere in Taiwan, which provides a space for exhibiting Malaysian cultural products and discourses. Lau admits that before studying in Taiwan, he knew little about making and appreciating film.[3] Taiwan can thus be seen as the cradle of his filmmaking vision. His short films *Rat* (鼠, 2008) and *When it Rains* (雨落誰家, 2012) won awards at the Taiwan Golden Harvest Awards, organized by the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, which also made space for short films and experimental student films. In 2013, he was selected to participate in the Golden Horse Academy, a filmmaking workshop founded and led by the renowned Taiwanese director, Hou Hsiao-hsien.[4]

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[3] Lau Kek Huat, personal interview, 17 Dec. 2017.

As a Malaysian abroad, Lau has been exposed to different lifestyles and values compared to those at home. His time in Taiwan has prompted him to rethink his relationship with Malaysia and triggered his curiosity regarding his homeland, inspiring him to make films about Malaysia (Tan). Since he admires the high degree of freedom of expression in Taiwan, he tries to use this more open environment to "do something for Malaysia" (Lin). In an interview, he admitted that his efforts to reconnect with Malaysia primarily centre around family stories and the history of Malaysia (Tan). His earliest attempt was *Cul de Sac Forest* (愛在森林邊境, 2009), a short film he created during his film studies. The film is narrated by a woman who receives a letter from her Malaysian lover from forty years prior, and it includes an analepsis of their youth during the Emergency when he had to leave her to join the communist rebels in the jungle. Having since migrated to Taiwan, she returns to Malaysia to meet the man she believed had died in the jungle. Here, a personal memory is juxtaposed against a national memory. According to Lau, he made the film to fill in the gaps in his own childhood memory, particularly concerning his missing grandfather (Lau).

This "searching-for-grandfather" theme is the major motivation behind *Absent*, a documentary presented in first-person narrative with Lau serving as the narrator. Lau begins by confessing that he had an estranged relationship with his father while growing up. While attempting to reconcile with his "absent father," he discovered that his father also had an "absent father," which may have contributed to his inability to establish a healthy relationship with his own family. Lau's grandfather died when his father was only three years old. After his grandfather was shot dead in front of his family when trying to flee from the authorities, his family pretended not to know him and suppressed their grief when the police carried the body away. There was no grave for his grandfather, and his burial place was unknown. According to Lau, his family back in Malaysia burned incense and lit candles in front of his grandfather's photograph during festivals, but he never knew what kind of person his grandfather was because of his parents' silence. Only later did he learn that his grandfather was a communist insurgent during the Emergency.

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[4] Taiwan has emerged as a significant centre for Sinophone cultural production and dissemination. Since the 1980s, it has attracted Chinese talents and cultural workers, especially those from Southeast Asia looking for cultural and other career opportunities. While Taiwan's film industry may not be considered overtly "strong," it has exercised considerable "soft power" through its cinematic legacy, especially from the Taiwan New Cinema of the 1980s. The comparatively higher level of freedom of expression and liberalism in the cultural sphere compared to China has enabled Taiwan to become a cinematic hub of film culture that tolerates more art-house, innovative, experimental, and critical reflective pursuits (Lim). *Boluomi*, which received a subsidy from the Taiwanese government, was nominated for the Best New Director award at the 2019 Golden Horse Awards. Although much of the attention that year was focused on the boycott of the Mainland Chinese film industry, following orders from state regulators, the nomination of *Boluomi* brought a fresh cultural atmosphere to the event and created more opportunities for films with Southeast Asian origins or themes to be recognized and celebrated.

The silence and surreptitious commemoration are due to the controversial and politically sensitive nature of the communist struggle in Malaysia, even in contemporary politics. The crux lies in the discourse on Malayan nation-building. The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)-led Barisan Nasional tends to frame the MCP and its members as terrorists who brutally sabotaged the country's economic and political system during their armed insurrection. The MCP's counterclaim is that it contributed to the anticolonial struggle and spurred the British to grant independence to Malaya. Therefore, its ex-members believe that they deserve recognition and a place in the anticolonial struggle (Chin and Hack 235; Stockwell 292). Although the MCP officially ended its armed struggle in 1989, after signing the Peace Accord with the Malaysian government, the resulting historical scars continue to haunt Malaysian politics.

Moreover, the communist struggle was densely intertwined with ethnic politics. Communism was first brought to Malaya by the radical faction within the Kuomintang during its first united front with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Cheah, *Red* 14; Hanrahan 7). The early MCP was arguably a "Chinese-oriented" organization, given that its leadership was predominantly Chinese, and that the earliest communist activities fought for the rights and improved welfare of Chinese labourers who had mostly migrated from southern China (Belogurova 85-89). Thus, a major factor for the MCP's failure was arguably its inability to attract significant numbers of members of other ethnicities, especially the Malays. Although there was a Malay Tenth Regiment, the actual number of Malay insurgents was too small to overturn the mainstream "Chinese-versus-Malay" historical discourse (Short 1081). Hence, rightist Malay nationalists could posit the communist struggle as an invasion by "outsider immigrant" Chinese attempting to seize political power from the "indigenous" Malays, who are figured as the legitimate owners of the land. Consequently, the communist past has been frequently exploited by UMNO politicians to legitimize the party's self-appointed role as guardians of Malay interests against Chinese domination.

Generally, Malaysia's nation-building process is fraught with "anxieties of remembering," where memories of the past are mobilized, selected, marginalized, silenced, and censored in the process of enforcing an exclusionary Malay nationalism that asserts Malay political pre-eminence over the Chinese and Indian immigrant communities (Cheah, *Malaysia* 27). In his famous essay, "What is a Nation?," Ernest Renan highlighted the significance of the past in forging nationhood, wherein "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (11). In other words, nationalist projects have always been intertwined with the state's "management of the past" by manipulating the politics of remembering and forgetting. Thus, the UMNO-dominated regime has tried to shape the contours of national remembrance by deliberately marginalizing and suppressing the history and memory of Chinese contributions in the Second World War, such as the communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA),[5] while disproportionately glorifying Malay sacrifice and resistance. In this regard, memory, which is considered "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (Erll 2), is a key consideration. The rehabilitation of the past always intermingles with the interrogation of present social, cultural, and political struggles—thus, memory is an active process of negotiating between past and present. The regime has skilfully manipulated the memory of the communist movement to ascribe responsibility for the Emergency to the Chinese while accentuating Malay efforts in defence and asserting sovereignty. Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack's book argues that commemorations of the Second World War show how official historical narratives and state commemorative ceremonies tend to treat the Japanese occupation as a demonstration of the rise of Malay nationalism while denigrating Chinese resistance and hardship under Japanese brutality. This manipulation of memories is obvious in secondary school textbooks, which simplify the communists as a brutal and dangerous (Chinese) terrorist force aiming to dominate the country (Ting 46-47). Lau admits that before he worked on the documentary, his knowledge about the communist struggle was limited since history textbooks tended to treat the conflict as a simplistic binary of good versus evil (Chang). This "absent [sic] of knowledge" motivated him to read academic studies and memoirs on ex-communists. He then embarked on a journey with a camera to interview ex-communists still residing in Malaysia, as well as those exiled to Hong Kong and China, while visiting the "Friendship Villages" in southern Thailand to obtain further accounts (Show).[6]

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[5] On the eve of the war, an agreement was reached between the MCP and the British. The British released detained communists from prison while the MCP set up its own "Malayan Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Mobilization Society" to recruit Chinese participants into a volunteer anti-Japanese force, which was later named Dalforce, organized by the British and headed by the Singaporean-Chinese industrialist Tan Kah Kee. The MCP's recruits were trained by Britain's 101 Special Training School (STS) in Singapore to assist them in fighting Japan. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya, the MCP's defence force eventually evolved into the MPAJA (see Cheah, *Malaysia* 58-66).

Although Lau gave himself the responsibility of "reclaiming the past," he refrained from using expert or academic opinions to provide authoritative views on the struggle. Instead, he gave opportunities to the ordinary ex-cadres to share their memories and express their aspirations behind their decisions to join the communist struggle. Those who appeared in the film asserted that they had dedicated their youth to liberating Malaya from the Japanese and British, trying to retain what Lau deemed to be their human dignity (Show). They believed that they fought for social justice and the benefit of Malayan society and did not deserve to be labelled as "terrorists." Although lacking expert opinions, *Absent* frequently employs "evidentiary editing" (Nichols 169) by inserting archival materials, including pictures provided by the interviewees and alternative publishing houses, British newsreels, and old newspapers as visual testaments connecting the narrative with the depicted historical events, all to give the filmic representation of the past an aura of authenticity.

*Absent* takes the audience to the "September First Martyrs' Monument" (九一烈士紀念碑) in one of the Friendship Villages in southern Thailand. This monument was built by ex-communists to commemorate their comrades who sacrificed their lives for the anticolonial struggle. This monument is actually a replica of the original one erected in 1946 by the Association of the Ex-Comrades of MPAJA in Batu Caves, Kuala Lumpur, to commemorate the massacre of eighteen MCP leaders and cadres ambushed by the Japanese on September 1, 1942. The original site gave way to development in the 1990s, and a new monument was built in Xiao En Memorial Park, a Chinese cemetery south of Kuala Lumpur (Wong). The new monument is now the location of the annual "September First Loyal Spirit Day" (九一忠魂節), which honours the martyrs who fought for decolonization. Interestingly, the film also gives the audience a glimpse of the original monument, which was restored by a few ex-cadres and hidden inside a marble factory near Kuala Lumpur to avoid being seen by the public—those responsible for restoring the monument were twice questioned by the police. The Malaysian government's selective remembering and commemoration forced the ex-communists to conduct their commemoration privately, such as in a factory or inside "Chinese spaces" invisible to Malay-Muslims. This may be seen as the state's attempt to prevent the Malays from gaining a more complex understanding of the communist struggle beyond the perception of alien saboteurs and terrorists.

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[6] These "Friendship Villages" were sponsored by the Thai government as a part of the 1989 Peace Accord, allowing ex-communists exiled to Thailand to have land on which to build their houses and engage in agricultural activities to sustain their livelihoods. These villagers were also provided with roads, medical clinics, and schools.

To challenge the stereotypical association between communism and Chinese ethnicity—as perpetuated by mainstream discourse—and to shatter the image of a "Chinese uprising," *Absent* features an interview with a Malay communist living in a Friendship Village. After the Second World War, some Malays were influenced by leftist ideology and communism and became MCP members, with some becoming cadres in its Tenth Regiment. After the MCP's defeat, they retreated past the Malaysian-Thai border, together with many Chinese cadres, and chose to stay in southern Thailand. These Malay communists represented a divergent trajectory from their UMNO counterparts in Malayan decolonization. Although the Tenth Regiment was never an effective insurgent force, consisting of only two to three hundred members (Short 1083), the interviewee believes that the Malay communists' contribution to the struggle was as important as their Chinese comrades. He discusses the importance of the joint efforts by Malays, Chinese, and Indians in fighting the British and explains the New Village (新村) resettlement plan (further elucidated below).

Towards its end, the film sentimentally portrays a reunion gathering in a Friendship Village, where Chinese and Malay ex-comrades greet and hug each other, dancing in the community hall. The dancing scene then cuts to black-and-white archival footage of multi-ethnic cadres dancing and playing sports. Besides debunking the Chinese-dominance stereotype in official discourse and emphasising transethnic solidarity in the communist struggle, this scene can also be read as an expression of Lau's hope for ethnic reconciliation and a more egalitarian Malaysian society, based on the legacy of the multi-ethnic, leftist independence struggle.

Lau's "searching-for-grandfather" theme and reclamation of the Malayan communist past is extended to *Boluomi*. As a complement to *Absent*, Lau made the film as a gesture of appreciation to the ex-communists whom he had interviewed and tried to use the stories and information gathered during his initial fieldwork and shooting (Chang). *Boluomi*'s Emergency-era section mainly takes place in New Village, one of many which were originally set up as barbed wire camps—whether they can be correctly classified as "concentration camps" remains a point of contention—built by the British to relocate rural Chinese squatters in facilitating the surveillance of communist activities and cutting lines of communication between villagers and the communist guerrillas. Interrupting contact prevented the villagers from providing the guerrillas with food, medicine, and other supplies. In these New Villages, the civil rights and freedom of the inhabitants were stripped and subject to state surveillance. They were subjected to screening or body searches by home guards and police constables to ensure that they did not bring food or other supplies to the guerrillas (see Stubbs 118-23). The film includes shots of barbed-wire gates, with home guards (who are coded as Malay) conducting body searches to ensure the villagers are not smuggling out supplies. The film also depicts scenes of villagers queueing for the limited food being offered by the central cooking stations and a British soldier threatening the villagers. By portraying the humiliating conditions of relocated Chinese squatters in their New Village, Lau attempts to counter the communal "Chinese-versus-Malay" discourse by depicting how the Chinese also suffered from hardship and distress during the Emergency.[7]

Indeed, to understand Lau's grandfather's generation's memories, the past needs to be properly retrieved. In *Absent*, there is a scene set during the Qing Ming Festival, during which traditional ancestor worship rites are performed. The graveyard, with its burning of joss sticks and joss papers, implies that the "expiation of the dead" (超度) is needed to better apprehend the past. In Hong Kong, where Lau filmed an old ex-communist riding the tram in North Point, the iconic Hong Kong tram's "ting ting" bell sound is superimposed with the sound of the bell normally used in Taoist religious or funerary ceremonies, thus audibly echoing this "expiation of the dead." The implied "authorial intention" is that expiation occurs by properly listening to those who are still alive, letting them tell stories that differ from the official versions (such as in school textbooks), and (re)presenting them via a filmic medium.

## Assessing Ex-communists' Identities

Besides contesting the nation-building discourse, *Absent* successfully highlights another related dimension of the communist past—the identities of the ex-cadres. Jeremy E. Taylor suggests that "Chineseness" is an essential yet overlooked dimension of the Cold War, contending that the conflict has had a long-lasting impact on the formation of identities and subsequent identity crises of Chinese communities worldwide, especially in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, where they constitute "significant minorities" (2). Furthermore, the Emergency triggered a divided degree of loyalty between China and Malaya, as the "Malayanization" of their identity started to evolve during this turbulent period (Low 46). Thus, it is significant that Chinese identities are the major theme of Lau's films. While many ex-communists have passed away, Lau needed to travel outside Malaysia to meet those still alive and in exile for his documentary.

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[7] Because of budget constraints, the production team could not build a large-enough New Village set. The set was built in Taiwan and the "Malay" home guards were played by Indonesians based in Taiwan. Shots were confined to close-ups and medium-shots, and long shots were avoided altogether in depicting village scenes (Lau, personal interview, 8 Nov. 2020).

For the early Chinese who sympathized with or outright joined the MCP, their identity-related dilemma can be interpreted as the result of them being born in China before coming to Malaya or being born when the Chinese still considered themselves as sojourners with little desire to settle down in a different land (Pan 21). In *Absent*, many Chinese were depicted as being attracted to the MCP's political ideology mainly because of anti-Japanese sentiment rooted in the invasion of China during the Second Sino-Japanese War. For instance, a female interviewee residing in Guangzhou shares her experiences from when she was a student: she developed a hatred towards Japan after the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which led to her participation in anti-Japanese musical troupes and selling flowers to collect funds to save China. Another female interviewee also shares her experience selling flowers during her schooldays to raise funds to fight the Japanese and participating in parades to promote Chinese nationalism. These experiences suggest that prewar Malayan Chinese schools remained heavily invested in China's predicament and political development. Not only were the textbooks imported from publishers in China, but some curricula were also tightly focused on China instead of Malaya or the British. Many teachers and school administrators were hired from China, many of whom fled its political chaos, some of whom were also activists sent by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to spread "progressive ideas" among Malayan Chinese youth. Thus, many students demonstrated strong disapproval of the colonial administration while some schools became hotbeds for communism, where youths actively participated in school unions and other underground organizations. Simultaneously, a China-oriented nationalism and identity was being strengthened as Malayan Chinese youths were deeply concerned about China's future and willingly devoted themselves to activities aiming at saving their motherland (Comber 31-33; Teoh 36-38).

While the Hong Kong-based interviewee explains that he was deported by the Malaysian government after twenty years of imprisonment, the film does not explain why the other interviewees left Malaysia. Although it is true that many were deported to China by the British and the Malay(si)an government to curb union and communist movements, some returned voluntarily to fight foreign imperialists and contribute to national construction (Wang 73-74). For example, one woman in Guangzhou narrates how her brother went back to China before the Second World War to fight the Japanese and later joined the Kuomintang to fight in the civil war. He was captured by the CCP and forced to join the People's Liberation Army.

Turning to Mainland China, *Absent* highlights the experiences of Malayan Chinese returnees to China. Lau interviewed the Malayan-born Wang Ming Hui, curator of the Guangdong Provincial Overseas Chinese Museum in Guangzhou, regarding the history of the arrests and deportations of suspected communist sympathizers. According to Wang, many deportees were prosecuted and sent to re-education camps during the Cultural Revolution as suspects of subversive activities because of their connections to Malaysia. Wang's parents were among these victims, and his mother committed suicide in the re-education camp. Such stories are compelling because they suggest the existence of another kind of discrimination even in their "motherland." Many returnees were resettled in facilities called "Overseas Chinese Farms" (華僑農場), established in southern China, to assimilate them into Chinese life and to develop the state-run, export-based agricultural economy. However, their official status remained "overseas Chinese" (華僑), "returnee Chinese" (歸僑), or "returned Chinese refugees" (難僑), semantically reinforcing their positions as "outsiders" who were different from "locals" (本地人). Those born in Southeast Asia possessed little knowledge about China, and by "returning"—even if they had never been there—they brought along their own hybridized culture, clothing, and ways of speech, which served to demonstrate their "Otherness." The allocations of schools, hospitals, markets, and factories *exclusively* for these returnees further isolated them from the rest of the population, which consequently resented and suspected them of abandoning their "motherland" and not sharing China's past hardship (Ford; Peterson 117). During the Cultural Revolution, many returnees were persecuted for having "illicit foreign relations" (i.e., their foreign background) and were accused of being subversive elements (e.g., "capitalists," "imperialists," "counter-revolutionaries," "worshippers of things foreign," "foreign devils"). Many were sent to re-education camps, and some, like Wang's mother, did not survive. Others lived in constant fear of prosecution and under heavy surveillance from the Red Guards (Ford 246; Godley 330). These separate but complementary treatments (i.e., "not accepted in the foreign land" and "being suspected in the motherland") brought about the creation of a unique solidarity of identity among the returnees (Ford 246). Not being fully accepted in China paradoxically reinforced their bonds with Southeast Asia.

*Absent* highlights such bonds with Malay(si)a, especially from a familial perspective. A woman in Guangzhou recalls her painful experience of leaving her newborn daughter behind when she departed for China in 1949. Although she met her adult daughter years later in Singapore, the woman felt no emotional attachment to her. A couple who came back to Malaysia after the 1989 Peace Accord also shares their experience of giving their children up for adoption because they could not raise a normal family while being involved in jungle warfare. These familial disintegrations were a reality of the communist struggle. These ex-communists live with feelings of regret while longing for a family reunion in Malaysia. Lau relates these disintegrations, all tied in with the communist insurrection.

Another cultural aspect of such bonding is also demonstrated through food. For example, Wang Ming Hui and his family liked to cook Malaysian-style curry chicken—having this dish is their way of remembering Malaya. While his father was not able to fulfill his wish of going back to Malaysia, adding fresh coconut milk to the dish was like "going back in time" to their life in Nanyang (the South Sea). Wang also mentions his experience of sharing a durian with the ex-comrades, who remembered it as a taste of Malaya. A woman from Guangzhou also says that while she lived in China during the daytime, she "dreams of Malaysia at night," of having coconut, curry, and the Nyonya-style *kuih* (cakes) while befriending the Malays, longing to stay with her sisters back in Malaysia.

These dual, intertwined identities are also demonstrated by the songs sung in the documentary. Another female interviewee in Guangzhou conveys a strong sense of nostalgia for her Malayan life and her longing to go back to Malaysia and spend time with her family by performing a Mandarin and a Malay song. However, the Mandarin song is actually "On the Songhua River" (松花江上), a "national salvation song" (救亡歌曲) containing the line "my home is at Songhua River" (a major river in Northeast China) from the Second Sino-Japanese War. The song is one of many created as propaganda to forge a collective national salvation consciousness among the Chinese and to galvanise them in the resistance against Japan (Howard 2-4). The singing echoes earlier scenes where a female interviewee sings "Selling Flower Song" (賣花詞), describing her experience selling flowers to raise funds for the anti-Japanese war.

Coincidentally, another female interviewee plays and sings the same song on the piano. While a detailed discussion on such "national salvation songs" is beyond the scope of this paper, it suffices to say that their deep impression on the students demonstrates the songs' resonance with the pervasive ardor for saving the motherland during the war. The proliferation of these songs was a part of the Chinese National Salvation movement, in which musical and choir troupes, drama and other performance groups were established to collect funds and promote Chinese nationalism. Groups such as the Wuhan Choir Troupe were invited to perform in Malaya while guiding the Malayan groups in performing and singing such songs, which rapidly increased their popularity among Malayan Chinese youths (Mak 65).

The lyrics of "Selling Flower Song," in particular, were written by the headmaster of a Chinese school in Malaya, who was moved by the effort of the students who sold flowers to collect donations. The song was the product of a collaboration with China's famous "national salvation song" composer, Xia Zhixiu (夏之秋), for his Wuhan Choir Troupe (武漢合唱團), which travelled to Malaya to help fundraise for the salvation movement. Thus, the song shares the same Chinese nationalistic spirit as other similar songs (Poon 38). This interviewee expresses her excitement at participating in a Chinese salvation movement parade, during which the participants chanted, "Arise! All those who do not want to be slaves!" (起來！不願做奴隸的人們！): the iconic beginning of "March of the Volunteers" (義勇軍進行曲). This "national salvation song" was made the provisional national anthem of "New China" in 1949 and later became the official national anthem in 1982.

Interestingly, *Absent* also features another (non-Chinese) song with nationalistic sentiments, a regional love song called "Terang Boelan" (Indonesian, "bright moon" or "moonlight"), which shares the same tune as the Malaysian national anthem "Negaraku" (My Country). The film plays different versions of "Terang Boelan" during interludes and the closing credits, including the Indonesian-language version by the Dutch-Indonesian singer Rudi van Dalm, and an English-language version called "Mamula Moon," as recorded by the English singer Felix Mendelssohn (not to be confused with his namesake classical composer) and his band, the Hawaiian Serenaders, which had a slower, romantic Hawaiian-style beat. The origins of the song and whether or not the Malaysian national anthem is a direct adaptation are disputed. Indonesians have long claimed that it is an adaptation of the Indonesian *keroncong* (a ukulele-like musical instrument) ballad, which appeared in the Indonesian film *Terang Boelan* (1937). Some historians argue that "Terang Boelan" was originally a French tune ("La Rosalie") written by French poet and lyricist Pierre-Jean de Beranger. According to one version, the tune was popular among sailors in the former French colony of Seychelles, who brought it to Southeast Asia and adapted it into a ballad. In another version, the tune was picked up by Sultan Abdullah Muhammad Shah II, the exiled sultan of Perak, and sent to Seychelles because he was accused of participating in the assassination of the British Resident J.W.W. Birch, in 1875. Upon returning to Malaya, he adapted the tune into his state anthem as "Allah Lanjutkan Usia Sultan" (Allah, "Prolong the Sultan's Age"), which the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman adapted into Malaya's national anthem. In other words, the national anthem may be a direct adaptation of the French tune and not the Indonesian ballad (Barendregt, Keppy, and Nordholt 26-27; Clark 399). The use of the tune in the film signifies an attempt to release it from its confinement to the nation-state's singular version alone. As Lau points out: "The tune is beautiful and has various meanings. Why must the meaning of the tune become standardized after it became the national anthem?"[8]

Instead, its inclusion in the film implies the former MCP cadres' love of Malaya, including the unique local culture which they lived in before leaving. However, this does not necessarily indicate a strong, exclusive nationalistic sentiment towards a single nation. Instead, this is their "love song" dedicated to Malaya, while they may have another "love song" dedicated to China. As Stuart Hall suggests, identity is "never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions" (4). The national salvation songs and "Terang Boelan" hint at the cadres' multiple identities, which are difficult to define by or confine to a single location.

Meanwhile, the images of the historic and the contemporary Penang ferry jetty featured in the film further underscore the themes of "drifting" and "travelling." While the Qing Ming sky lanterns shown in the early section of the film symbolise the ancestors' spirits or ghosts (keeping with the Qing Ming Festival theme), they also imply the cadres' "floating" identities. After returning to China, they can hardly set foot in Malaysia and maybe other countries again. As Lau's father says at the ending, "I am not sure where I am anymore." These unmoored identities are historical by-products, where communists and communism are treated as the national political bogeyman.

## Searching for a Chinese Malaysian Identity vis-à-vis Ethnic Politics

For Lau, exploring the past and interrogating ex-communist identities is a means of locating and renegotiating his own identities. As mentioned above, an important motive for making *Absent* was to reconcile with his estranged father, who also lacked a healthy father-son relationship because of Lau's grandfather's communist background. In *Boluomi*, the communist figure is replaced by a grandmother depicted as a mother who abandons her son to join the guerrillas in the jungle. The film uses long shots to portray the mother carrying the baby to the jungle's edge and putting it into the titular jackfruit. A Malay man finds the jackfruit and brings it home, and it does not take long for him and his wife to discover the baby inside. The jackfruit symbolizes the protective placenta, foreshadowing the child's future without the protection and care of his mother. This story of a mother leaving her child to the care of adoptive parents thematically echoes the experiences of the ex-communists interviewed in *Absent*, whose family ties and relationships have been severed.

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[8] Lau, personal interview, 8 Nov. 2020.

The child is raised by the Malay couple, and only years later does his mother come to reclaim him. However, the child has a difficult time living with his biological mother because he was raised Malay—that is, he now speaks Malay and practices Islam and the Malay way of life. The mother tries hard to "re-Sinicise" her son, including forcing him to pray with incense sticks. As a result, an identity crisis emerges. Although their mother-son relationship slowly improves, she is later shot dead by the police, having been suspected of smuggling a communist rebel into the New Village. This crisis and the apparent cultural incompatibility between the Malays and the Chinese are further reflected in the uneasy Chinese-Malay relationship depicted in the film's 2000s segment, where the male protagonist Yifan—who can be read as Lau's stand-in—is shown quarrelling with his Malay schoolmates after failing to get a place in a public university because of the way the education policy prioritizes Malay applicants. The Malay schoolmates ridicule Yifan as a "*budak Cina*" ("Chinese kid"), telling him to "go back to China." The phrase "go back to China" is not new in Malaysian politics, being occasionally used by ultranationalist Malay politicians to denounce the Chinese for demanding too much and infringing upon what they deem Malay's special rights (Khoo 162). Thus, the ostensibly neutral "*budak Cina*" acquires negative connotations, and the film's English-language subtitles translate it as the more derogatory "Chink."

Yifan does have a Malay girlfriend, but they end their relationship because he has to go to Taiwan to study—thus the doomed inter-ethnic relationship suffers from ethnic politics. As mentioned, Chinese dominance of the communist struggle was treated as grounds for suspicion regarding ethnic Chinese loyalty to the newly founded Malay(si)an nation-state, thus adding obstacles for ethnic Chinese in seeking their rightful status in the nation-building process and hindering the process of establishing local roots. The state's management of memory can be read as being designed to represent ethnic Chinese as a common threat to the Malays and to construct an excuse to curb their political power and economic participation. By depicting the modern Chinese-Malay relationship via Yifan's story, the film tries to connect the stigmatization of the Chinese as communist bogies with the current structural discrimination in Malaysia. This structural discrimination, wherein affirmative action policies are increasingly coded in terms of a right-wing "*Ketuanan Melayu*" ("Malay Supremacy") ideology over decades of Barisan Nasional rule, effectively demotes non-Malays to second-class citizens, denying them equal opportunities while preventing the emergence of a discourse based on class lines. Thus, this politically constructed division cements ethnic polarization and hinders integration into Malaysian society.

Like many younger generations of Chinese Malaysians, Lau's identities have always been confounded by domestic ethnic politics. "I love Malaysia, but does Malaysia love me?"—this seems to be the essential question behind this identity crisis. Through Yifan, Lau also positions himself as a typical Chinese Malaysian denied an equal status and forced to travel elsewhere to secure educational and career opportunities. Taiwan has become one such popular destination, and although Lau appreciates its relative liberalism, he still thinks of himself as a diasporic Malaysian who *cannot* be entirely accepted as Taiwanese. This "not here and being denied there" characteristic is again demonstrated by Yifan and the female Filipino worker in the film, marking another connection to the ex-communists interviewed in *Absent*.

Returning to the motif of the jackfruit, its pungent aroma upon ripening conveys Lau's nostalgia for the best moments with his family in Malaysia, especially with his alienated father (Chang). It also captures the diasporic sense, as seen in one scene when a university professor explains how the tropical fruit travelled to Taiwan and "localized" itself, acquiring a dual meaning because the professor is also from Malaysia and indeed played by Malaysian-born Taiwanese scholar Tee Kim Tong. The film also discloses that the word for "jackfruit" in Tagalog, a major Philippine language, is also "boluomi," thus tightening the shared diasporic connection between the Malaysian student Yifan and Laila, a Filipino worker. Hence, *Boluomi* tries to connect the histories of diasporic Malaysian Chinese with more current Southeast Asian diasporic communities in Taiwan, where groups are considered outsiders by their host country.

In another scene, Yifan accidentally cuts his finger while cutting meat in the steamboat restaurant where he works. According to Lau, finger-cutting is a symbol of exile in an Arabian proverb, and Yifan loses his finger due to his "rootlessness" in Taiwan (Chang). This connects to Yifan's father, who is a debt-ridden gambler, and who also lost a finger. The strained father-son relationship culminates in a violent altercation where Yifan chops off his father's finger with a cleaver. Although the film does not explicitly reveal Yifan's father as the protagonist of the Emergency-era segment (i.e., the child), it does hint that both the good-for-nothing father and the child belong to the same "Emergency-era generation." This generation struggled with identity crises and upbringings amidst turbulence, which resulted in the father's poor parenting ability. The loss of a finger by both father and son symbolizes their displacement and rootlessness caused by the Malayan Emergency.

There are ultimately gestures of reconciliation, however: there is a scene where the child of the Emergency segment tells his mother about dreaming of a man who accidentally cuts his finger, while in the contemporary segment, Yifan accidentally cuts his finger. Through this dream, the father-son relationship is metaphorically patched up and reconnected. In another scene, Yifan shows Laila some archival photographs of MCP rebels projected onto a cloth screen. When Laila asks whether his grandparents were communists, Yifan answers: "I don't know. I have never seen them. I know they joined the war. They can be anyone here you see in the photo. . . . But the country denies them." Before this scene, the film does not show Yifan's interest in the Malayan communists, and it becomes obvious, if we read the authorial intention here, that Lau projects himself strongly onto Yifan. The photographs projected onto the swaying cloth, blowing in the wind, grow unrealistic and become like a "dream of the past." Is it the dream of the ex-communists for their unfulfilled struggle? Or is it Yifan's dream to reconcile with his grandparents' past? Yifan then tells Laila that although his father was deficient because of his cowardice, he still loves his father. And by apprehending his grandparents' past, he is finally able to empathise with his father's situation, forgive him, and mend their relationship.

As Ross Poole suggests, memory not only provides us with knowledge of the past but also "a route by which responsibility for past events is transmitted to the present, and thus to identify a locus of present responsibility" (152). This is in line with Allan Megill's suggestion about how the growing importance of and preoccupation with memory in contemporary human cultural life are entangled with insecurities about one's identity:

> In a world in which opposing certainties come into frequent conflict with each other and in which a multitude of identity-possibilities are put on display, insecurity about identity is a possibly inevitable by-product. In such a situation there is ample reason for 'memory' to come to the fore. A rule might be postulated: where identity is problematized, memory is valorised. (39-40)

Thus, past experiences become guidelines for our present responsibilities and influence our current conception of ourselves and our identities. Lau's deeper, and perhaps ultimate, motive for finding his grandparent and reconnecting with his parent's memory is to find his own identities, or using Hall's words: "coming-to-terms-with our 'routes'" (4).

## Conclusion: Memory as an Agent of Change

Towards the end of *Boluomi*, the Malay-language version of *Terang Boelan* is used as the ending song, echoing *Absent*. The song is now framed as Lau's personal love song to Malaysia, in his "exile" in Taiwan pursuing his filmmaking career. His identity crisis may not be as severe as the ex-communists interviewed in *Absent*, who went through the Second World War, the Emergency, and banishment. However, from his base in Taiwan, he hopes to do something for his Malaysia, belonging as he does to the new generation of cultural workers trying to construct a bridge for interethnic conversation amidst mistrust and division. Working from Taiwan, Lau tries to expand upon his personal motives for familial reconciliation and national wellness through interethnic dialogue, as seen in his interrogation of the political taboo of the communist insurgency.

The French historian Pierre Nora suggests that the recent surges of interest in engaging with memory, including efforts to recover memories that have been repressed or ignored, are due to the potential of these memories to serve as a tool for challenging the official version of history (440). Such a position also aligns with the notion that "where there is power, there is resistance," with the belief that hegemonic memory will always be challenged by a bottom-up, counter, or alternative memory (Misztal 62). Here, Lau counters state-sanctioned memory by recollecting the experiences and opinions of participants in the communist struggle and transmitting them to the general Malaysian population. However, he tries to avoid being a representative or an advocate for the MCP, even though his films provide an alternative space for ex-cadres to voice their anticolonial visions and beliefs. Valuing the importance of getting stories from "both sides," he is irritated when his creations are solely considered "the voice of [the marginalized] Chinese." He hopes to make a film regarding the communist insurrection from a Malay perspective, convinced that the Malays should also be voicing their disagreements with and unpleasant experiences of the communist movement. He would be more than willing to film and tell the story of the Malays if their grievances towards the communists stemmed from their suffering and bereavement at the communists' hands.[9]

Nevertheless, *Absent* and *Boluomi* are very much presented from the Chinese prism. Although *Absent* features an interview with a Malay communist, it is marginal compared to the Chinese perspectives. Thus, his own questions of exile, identity and nationalism are left unexplored. Thus, Lau's films are not without limitations. He depicts the hardship of Chinese squatter life in the New Village in *Boluomi* to counter the discourse of there only being "Malay victimhood" during the Emergency. The New Village is deeply entangled with the history of Chinese survival and identity crises, with the majority of the Chinese situated in the crossfire between MCP insurgents and government forces. Torn between China and

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[9] Lau, personal interview, 17 Dec. 2017.

Malaya, their political orientation was uncertain as they struggled to reconstruct their post-war lives and their long history of being treated as sojourners (Vasil 20). This uncertainty and the tendency to keep their options open saw them cast as fence-sitters, which frustrated the colonial government (Hack 680). Hence, besides portraying the hardship, the film offers a limited perspective on the political and psychological implications of the New Villages. What did the ordinary Chinese villagers think about the MCP? How did the resettlement plan affect their identities? The film does not provide adequate explorations and answers.

To counter the official, state-sanctioned memory, Lau has felt the urgent need to eradicate the stereotypical portrayal of the communists as terrorists imposed by the regime. He excluded some of the interviews that were overtly communist-oriented during the editing process of *Absent* and instead highlighted their (publicly acceptable) decency by participating in the anticolonial movement (Huang). He also left out some "dark stories" of the communists' savage killings of traitors (real or suspected) gathered during his fieldwork.[10] However, this intention may jeopardise the complexities of engaging in counter-memories, which must necessarily include the harm and wrongdoing committed by the MCP, the suffering of their victims, and situations that might blur the boundary between victim and aggressor. In other words, to accept uncomfortable facts and dark stories is necessary for an honest accounting of the communist struggle that might demonstrate its multifaceted contours.

Despite these limitations, Lau's efforts to pluralize the memories of the communist struggle should be recognized. They perpetuate the contestation for Emergency's meanings and legacies, enabling the emergence of new identities and political subjectivities that challenge the dominant system. As Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt assert:

> Memory is not only susceptible to changes, it is itself a powerful agent of change. Accredited with the power of transforming our relationship to the past and the ability to revise former values and attitudes, memory can create new frames of action. By working through past hatreds and resentments, memory can contribute towards reconciliation and new forms of co-existence, opening up the possibility of a common future. (4)

Lau's reappropriation of memories of struggle may construct a meaningful bridge between past and present and craft a path towards a more ethnically integrated future. However, as a result of the ban, Lau's films were never allowed to generate intensive discussion and debate in Malaysia. This suggests that those in power are continuously discouraging Malaysians from engaging in a more complex understanding of the communist past while perpetuating the discourse of communist struggle as a bogey dominated by the Chinese.

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[10] Lau, personal interview, 17 Dec. 2017.

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