

Independent Digital Film Practice in Contemporary Malaysia: Imagining Malay/sia as a ‘Malaysian’ Malaysia?

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Introduction: A ‘Chinese’ Cinema in ‘Beautiful Malaysia’?

Let me begin this essay with a disclaimer. I must admit at the outset that I am not a suitable person to study the Malaysian or a Chinese cinema. I am not a Malaysian and I know neither Malay nor any of the Chinese languages. I am only armed with my background in Film and Media Studies, in particular with interest in Asian Cinemas in postcolonial settings. I am also blessed (!) with my ‘South Asian-ness’ and with some ability of dissecting English-language texts. With these limited abilities I endeavour this inter-Asian, cross-cultural exploration. However, my non-Malaysian but Asian identity puts me in a unique position to study Chinese films of Malaysia. I become one of the first Asian non-Malaysian scholars studying Malaysian cinema as I belong to none of the two main groups of scholars working on this cinema. The first group, as may be expected, consists of Malaysian, Malay or Chinese, scholars and film critics: Hamza Hussin, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Hassan Muthalib, Hatta Azad Khan, Wong Tuck Cheong, Fuziah Kartini, Hassan Basri, Faridah Ibrahim, Amir Muhammad, Baharudin Latif, Mahiyuddin Ahamd, Norman Yosoff, Adnan M. Hamdan, M. Shariff Ahmad and others. The second group comprises some Western or Euro-American scholars and film critics: John Lent, William Van Der Heide, Timothy White, Timothy P. Bernard, Gordon T. Gray, Benjamin McKay, Robert Williamson, Adeline Kueh and Ben Slater, to name a few. This research project therefore initiates a third stream that was hitherto non-existent: Asian (non-Malaysian) scholarship on Malaysian cinema. Very few South Asian scholars ever attempted to study film industries in Southeast or East Asia, let alone a complex and emerging entity like Chinese Malaysian cinema. This paper then may be considered as one of the first studies (if not the first one) conducted by a South Asian scholar on an aspect of Malaysian film culture. This effort in this way signifies the emerging trend of crossing cultures and national borders in studying Asian cinemas. However, this ‘cross-over’ position puts me at risk too. Borrowing Kim Soyung’s term, I am here ‘risking looking’ (2007: Conference Intro) by attempting to understand a film culture that is almost new for me. I am also at risk of bringing in (if not imposing) frameworks that I learnt in other contexts put to use in this new epistemological territory I am trying to explore. Why and how did I become interested in taking up such a risky, cross-cultural endeavour?

This paper is the outcome of my recent research stint in Malaysia for the most part of 2007. An ASIA fellowship offered by the Asian Scholarship Foundation enabled me to stay in Kuala Lumpur studying contemporary Malaysian films. I got to see a good number of independent Malaysian films for the first time. The bulk of these films were digital shorts made by young, aspirant ‘Chinese’ filmmakers in which the characters communicate in Chinese languages, and sometimes in English. In this process, I first watched a collection of Malaysian shorts titled as ‘2005 Beautiful Malaysia Shorts’. Here I encountered the flagship film of the collection, *Beautiful Malaysia*, a 12-minute film by Zun Yap.

The film is set in a meeting room of a prison. Here a journalist and a photographer, two Chinese women, encounter a convicted drug dealer before he is to be hanged.ⁱ We hear that the convict, a Chinese Malaysian, was a police officer before (a rare feat for a Chinese, as most, if not all, State jobs are offered to Malay Malaysians by decree of a constitutional ‘policy’). But he resigned from the police job, got connected with the drug racket, and finally was caught by police. The man admits that he was aware of drug dealing when he was a police officer but does not enumerate why he crossed sides. The journalist asks him if he feels remorse for the harms he did to ‘innocent’ people. He says he does not feel any guilt or sorrow, and quite ironically, asks the journalist if she can let him feel regret. Then they take a break. After the break when the interview starts again, the man sitting on his chair seems quite easy and asks the journalist to go ahead with her questions. However, the journalist neither poses a question, nor sits. Rather she places her tape-recorder on the table and starts playing it. We hear *Negaraku*, the Malaysian national anthem. We understand that the journalist recorded it during the break (that she learnt in her school days?). Hearing the anthem, at first the convict man becomes perplexed, and cannot decide what to do. Then he slowly rises from his chair and stands up to show the customary respect to the national anthem. Does he feel regret now? We cannot be sure. The film ends here.

This minimalist short film shot in an ordinary room with only a few chairs and a table, within its short span, made me aware of the questions and complexities inherent in independent film-making practices, nationhood, and Chinese identity in contemporary Malaysia. This short film on digital video made by a Chinese Malaysian filmmaker can be taken as an example of the new wave of Malaysian independent cinema. These kinds of ‘Chinese’ films portraying characters using Chinese languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien) and English constitute the majority of the corpus of Malaysian independent cinema in the 2000s (Khoo 2007: 228-9). These films normally tell the stories of Chinese protagonists in some locales of contemporary Malaysia where we rarely see a non-Chinese character. In other words, these films represent a ‘Chinese’ environment in contemporary, multi-cultural Malaysia, or cinematically construct a ‘Chinese Malaysia’. This paper takes a look at the contexts, institutional aspects, and a few of the texts this ‘Chinese Malaysian cinema’ has produced. Here I investigate the possibility of seeing this Chinese-made, Malaysia-based film practice as a distinct cinema and its relationship with the national and the transnational. While these Chinese film-authors of Malaysia received attention from film festivals, scholars, and film critics and their films have been hailed as important and innovative artistic or filmic ventures, their works as a distinct cinema has rarely been discussed.ⁱⁱ This essay is one of the early efforts to situate these ‘Chinese Malaysian’ films for a sustained understanding especially as and in relation to transnational Chinese cinema(s).

By putting the non-Malay, ‘Chinese’ films of Malaysia in various possible contexts, this paper attempts to provide a framework to understand these Chinese-produced digital films in the last seven years or so as the growth of a Malaysian-Chinese cinema. The contexts I assume for such an emerging cinema are neither concrete nor complete. As Lawrence Grossberg says,

The problem of interpreting any cultural text ... must always involve constituting a context around it... but contexts are not entirely empirically available because they are not already completed, stable configurations. ... They are... the site of contradictions, conflicts, and struggles... [cited in Lee (2005: 116)].

With this cue in mind, I proceed to locate the Chinese films of Malaysia with/in various incomplete and contradictory contexts ranging from the national to the transnational. The possible contexts in which I wish to situate these films correspond to each other, and, to some extent, conflict with each other too. First, I attempt to position the Chinese-language films of Malaysian filmmakers in their home ground. I consider these 'Malaysian' films alongside Malaysian national cinema that is largely a Malay-language feature film industry consumed mainly within Malaysian national borders. Here I look at the possibility of marking this cinema as a 'Mahua' (Malaysian Chinese) cinema alongside the Mahua literature that developed in Malaysia in the last century or so. Since no cinema in the contemporary world can be seen as a national endeavour anymore, rather like other cultural productions, films of any nation, space, or community are essentially transnational, transcultural entities, my second step is to de-territorialize the Chinese films of Malaysia and locate these films as a 'non-Malaysian cinema'. Here I examine if the digital-media Malaysian-Chinese films may be seen as a 'new' transnational Chinese cinema developed in connection with and in opposition to other transnational cinemas in the contemporary cosmopolitan world. I ask how this cinema is 'transnational' and if it bears some specific meaning of 'Chinese-ness' as it develops in a globalizing Malaysia.

Malay-language 'National' Cinema and the Chinese as 'Other' in Malaysia

The nationhood of Malaysia is far from a well-defined matter. One cannot doubt if the Malaysian nation may be called an 'imagined community' in Anderson's terms (2006: 14) as the imagining of this nation happened almost in an elitist manner. The birthing of this nation did not pass through bloody, populist, anti-colonial struggles. Rather, it was born in 1957 with no bloodshed, only through the negotiations between the British and the pro-British Western-educated leaders of the major races of West Malaysia in the early-to-mid 1950s amid the threats of communist insurgencies. In the same way, that is through a series of meetings and talks, the geographical area and population of the nation got enlarged significantly when Singapore and the states of Sabah and Sarawak (now called East Malaysia) were appended to West Malaysia in 1963, though Singapore left the arrangement in 1965. Such pre-planned, if not painless and engineered, birth of 'Malaysia' that mainly took place in meetings in Londonⁱⁱⁱ and the multi-racial, multi-language, and multi-religious mosaic of the Malaysian population clearly position this nation as an 'artificial construct' (Spivak, 1990: 39). One can easily find artificiality at various levels of the construction of the Malaysian nation if one looks at the racial and religious formations underneath this nationhood. The 1998 estimate finds there are 57% Malay/*Bumiputera* (lit. 'sons of soil'), 24% Chinese and 7% Indians with many sub-groups within each major racial community.

Religiously, while ‘virtually’ all Malays are Muslims, almost all Chinese and Indians are non-Muslims: Buddhists, Christians and Hindus (Andaya and Andaya, 2001: 4-6). However, the Department of Statistics of the Malaysian Government presents the three main racial communities in 2002 as 65% (Malay), 26% (Chinese) and 7.7% (Indian) respectively; it also claims that there are 60% Muslims, 19% Buddhists, 9% Christians and 6% Hindus (Balraj, 2003: 176). Alongside this ever-changing mosaic, the race riots of May 1969 between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia and after that the State’s pro-Malay policies in engineering a harmonious (read pro-Malay) nation are enough to consider Malaysia as a cultural artefact.

In other words, the construction of nationhood and the project of nation-building took a bluntly pro-Malay turn after the 1969 tragedy. The race riots of May 1969 in which the Malays supposedly attacked and killed huge numbers of Chinese Malaysians is certainly the most decisive incident that reshaped the history and nationhood of/in postcolonial Malaysia. After the race riots, in 1970, the longest-running Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad said, “Looking back through the years ... there was never true racial harmony” (4-5). Such understanding coupled with the idea of the ‘genetic’ backwardness of the Malays made the State initiate the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 (Loo, 2003: 183). The NEP extended more privileges to the Malays and ensured that the Malays or *Bumiputeras* gained better positions in business, academia and politics in Malaysia; however, “it also meant that the other races were required to sacrifice” (Tope, 2001: 3-4). Filmmaker Amir Muhammad ridicules the outcome of the NEP in the 1970s-90s when he complains: “Some political and language leaders seemed more interested in establishing solidarity with Malay South Africans rather than non-Malay Malaysians” (Muhammad, 1998: 105). This *bumiputera*/Malay policy of the Malaysian nation is still in place. Such highly segmented race situation in Malaysia makes the Indian-Malaysian politician Kayveas (who himself is part of the coalition in power, Barisan Nasional) ask: “I go to London and I am a Malaysian; I go to China and I’m a Malaysian...But why is it when I come back to Malaysia, I am an Indian?” (Khoo and Tan, 2007: 34).

Such contest among various races, but especially between the Malays and its *Other*, certainly requires that one takes the Malaysian nation as a “a cultural space ... with its transgressive boundaries and its ‘interruptive’ interiority” (Bhabha, 1990a: 5). For nations like Malaysia that combine many a races and ethnic groups, Bhabha rightly pointed out, there are no nations as unified entities as such. Rather, there are hybrid communities that must not be named too easily and positively (1990b: 291-322). Therefore, the leading Malaysian cinema scholar Gaik Cheng Khoo rightly uses Bhabha’s concept of ‘DissemiNation’ and renames this nation as ‘Malay/sia’ (2006a: 56-82). I would argue that the conflicts and interactions among middle class Malays and the Chinese Malaysians as well as their search for a suitable identity (e.g. Malaysian, Malay-Muslim, Chinese, Chinese-Malaysian etc.) served as the major force for development of a Malay-language national film industry in

postcolonial Malaysia as well as of a multi-language but largely Chinese-language independent cinema in recent years.

Though the Malay-language cinema has been normalized as Malaysian national cinema over the years (Khoo, 2006a: 102-3), this cinema was and is always a hybrid cultural institution. Hamzah Hussain rightly comments that the “Malaysian film industry was founded on Chinese money, Indian imagination and Malay labour” (cited in Van Der Heide, 2002: 105). However, the hybridity of the Malaysian nation and of the Malaysian cinema was never celebrated in Malaysia. For example, the role of the Chinese or Indian Malaysians in the film industry as well as the production and dissemination of Chinese-language digital films were and are never positioned as important parts of Malaysian cinema history.

Most survey histories written on and about cinema in Malaysia do not acknowledge the filmic efforts of the independent filmmakers in Malaysia, let alone the development of a Chinese-language cinema in recent years. This ‘anti-Chinese’ tendency is somewhat similar to the efforts of the pro-Malay government of Malaysia since the riots of 1969. In the 1970s-80s the State’s explicit pro-Malay policies also Malayanized the film industry. For example, the State established FINAS or National Film Development Corporation in 1981 after repeated appeals from the middle-class cultural-nationalist Malaysians. One of the first steps FINAS took was to make film companies (which were mostly Chinese-owned) limit their business activities and focus on either the production or exhibition part of the business. Such forced decrease of Chinese domination in film production and exhibition businesses encouraged Malay Muslims to come into the film business in Malaysia.

Such State-sponsored pro-Malay policies in all the sectors worked towards de-emphasizing certain notions of national/cultural identity in post-1969 Malaysia, such as Chinese-Malaysian identity. Alongside such Malay-nationalist viewpoint, a certain ‘anti-independent’, anti-digital way of understanding cinema developed in 1980s-90s Malaysia. This way of looking at cinema may be termed as an aestheticist-culturalist view towards cinema. This view understands films made in ‘professional’ celluloid format (that is, 35 mm) in a professional way (in commercial studios) and shown in conventional settings (huge cinemas) are the only films to be considered as part of the national culture of Malaysia. Therefore, when the independent films on digital format started to be made in the early-2000s, such films were not considered as part of the Malaysian cinema culture. In this way, the Chinese-language films, the majority of independent films made in Malaysia in last few years, seemed problematic to the nationalist Malaysians as these cannot be accommodated within the ‘national cinema’ of Malaysia, but these films are hard to ignore as they gained entry and awards in international film festivals under the country called ‘Malaysia’.

Malaysian Independent Cinema as a Cinema of the Chinese in Malaysia

Why have the independently-produced Chinese-language digital films turned into a strong current in the Malaysian mediascape only in recent years? Obviously this trend is linked with the social, technological, and media changes of the 1990s and 2000s. In the late 1990s, the Malaysian nation entered a new phase of nation-building spearheaded by Mahathir. This phase is visibly symbolized in the completion of huge and 'ultramodern' construction projects like Petronas Twin Towers (in 1996), Suria KLCC (in 1998) and the new KL international airport at Sepang (in 1999). The Malaysian media also got globalized in the 1990s through the State-sponsored Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), the privatization of local television, and the penetration of transnational satellite television channels. While television media became more and more commercialized in the 2000s, MSC has been seen as an important part of Mahathir's 'Vision 2020'. Some argue that MSC and Vision 2020 renegotiated a multi-racial identity for Malaysia (Saloma, 2005).

Therefore the 1990s and 2000s can be seen as the period when Malaysia established itself as one of the rare species of the almost-developed Asian nation that is ready to embrace new technologies. This wealthier Asian nation status within an increasingly global economic playground also led to the rise of a new art cinema discourse that is varied and vibrant. For example, a new wave of Malay art cinema started with Hajisaari's *Kaki Bakar (The Arsonist)*, the first Malaysian film screened at the prestigious Cannes film festival in 1994.

This new trend of Malay-language art cinema developed in 1990s Malaysia can be seen as precursor to the current independent digital film movement. In this period, with the arrival of a new generation of Western-educated Malay(sian) filmmakers like U-Wei Hajisaari, Mansur Puteh, Anuar Nor Arai and Shuahaimi Baba, the Malay film industry produced some art films that tackled the issues hitherto not represented on cinema screens in Malaysia. These filmmakers and their films worked towards the revival of Malay-language 'national' film industry through an art cinema discourse. These modernist Malay filmmakers assumed different roles and perceptions around a Malay art cinema and wanted to utilize cinema to critique the society they were in. In few years time, two other filmmakers joined this trend of Malaysian art cinema -- Teck Tan, a Chinese and Yasmin Ahmad, a Malay filmmaker. Teck Tan with his *Spinning Top*^{iv} (2000) and Yasmin Ahmad with her *Slit-eyed (Sepet)*, (2005), both films dealing with inter-racial love affairs between Chinese and Malay young people in contemporary Malaysia, created a ground for newer and younger voices to come in.

The digital-format, self-funded independent Malaysian cinema started to develop within this changing mediascape of the 1990s-2000s. This low-budget, multi-language, artisanal-mode independent cinema developed in Malaysia largely because of the easier

availability of high-resolution digital video cameras and user-friendly digital editing facilities. Amir Muhammad, a Malay-Indian writer-columnist, started the trend of Malaysian digital new wave in 2000 with his digital feature film, *Lips to Lips*. James Lee's two features, *Snipers* (2001) and *Ah Beng Returns* (2001), closely followed *Lips*. Quickly after that Ho Yuhang, Tan Chui Mui, Woo Ming Jin, Khoo Eng Yow, Chris Chong Fui and a host of other Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers started to make their marks in the Malaysian independent cinema scene. These filmmakers contributed a good number of Chinese-language films to this trend during 2001-2007 and these films make up the majority of contemporary independent films of Malaysia. Gaik Cheng Khoo (2006a: 123) points out:

Many Independent filmmakers are, for the first time, Malaysian Chinese,...whose representations of themselves, as well as the stories they tell—whether in Malay, English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, etc.—all challenge the negative ethnic stereotypes prevalent (in the Malay-language mainstream cinema).

Following the literary practice of Malaysian Chinese authors in Chinese languages, a practice going on for some decades in Malaysia, I wish to position these Chinese-language films of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers as 'Mahua' cinema. The word 'Mahua' comes from *Malaiya huaqiao* and stands for the Malaysian Chinese. This term has been used for Malaysian Chinese literature (*Mahua Wenxue*) since the 1930s (Kok Chung 2005: 31), though it has never been used in the case of Chinese films of Malaysia. As I wish to locate the Chinese Malaysian films as a discrete cinema culture, I find that it can be considered in a par with the Mahua literature. As the Chinese Malaysians in the early twentieth century believed that they were only temporary settlers in Malaya, the Mahua literature of that time mainly depicted China (the mainland). However, during the Second World War when Malaya was occupied by the Japanese army, Chinese Malaysians became more at home in Malaya and started a new stream of Mahua literature that talks more about the local realities and less about the nostalgia for China. Though the Mahua writers reflected more on their life in Malaysia in the 1950s-60s, the National Cultural Policy adopted by the State in 1971 did not accept Mahua literature "as a component of national literature, ...because its medium of writing is Chinese" (Kok Chung 2005: 34). Within such 'anti-Chinese' linguistic-cultural environment of Malaysia, and because of the Malay hegemony in the film industry as outlined above, the Chinese Malaysians were not able to express themselves with/in the film medium during the second half of the twentieth century. Only when the cheaper and higher-resolution digital video became available did the cinematic expression of the Chinese Malaysians start -- that I call Mahua cinema.

Mahua cinema as a means of expression for the Malaysian Chinese becomes more important when we consider the strict control exercised on Malaysian media by the State. The use of mass media as a way of keeping the status quo among various races and communities is still prevalent in Malaysia, even in 2007. The current prime minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi (also internal security minister) when delivering a keynote at the 2007 Mass Media

Conference organized by the internal security ministry in Kuala Lumpur justified the necessity of media control laws by saying: “When naughty children are no longer unruly, the cane should not be thrown away. Just hang it on a nail on the wall” (Manirajan, 2007: 2). He also lauded the nation-building role of the media: “Malaysian media have been very responsible or we would have been torn apart a long time ago” (do). Within this State-controlled media environment of Malaysia, it is notable that because most of the Chinese-language digital films produced since the early 2000s were not screened in the local cinemas, these films did not need to go through the censorship procedure of the State. So the Mahua cinema quickly turned to be a newer vehicle of free expression and identity formation for the Chinese Malaysians.

Malaysian Independent Digital Cinema as a Transnational Cinema

Mahua cinema that consists of Chinese-language shorts, documentaries, and feature films produced in digital video during the last seven years can be seen as a ‘transnational project’ (Tsing 2000, cited in Berry and Farquhar 2006: 196) in the global world of the 2000s. This cinema as a transnational project needs to be seen in a paradoxical frame because these films are produced and circulated at the interface of the national and the transnational. Almost all the Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers who are contributing films to Mahua cinema represent the post-1969 generation and are very much rooted in the national conditions of Malaysia. They were all born and brought up in 1970s-90s Malaysia under the NEP. They were also educated in local institutions. For example, James Lee took classes at the Actors Studio in Kuala Lumpur and worked as a karaoke waiter, restaurant cook, and bookshop assistant to make ends meet. In his words, “I was planning to go to a film school, overseas, but (I couldn’t) afford it lah” (Fadzil 2005). Tan Chui Mui, born in the small town of Kuantan also studied in Kuala Lumpur at the Multimedia University. Though some Chinese Malaysian filmmakers went overseas for study (e.g. Ho Yuhang, Chris Chong Fui), they returned and are staying in Kuala Lumpur to make their films.

If we look at the texts of Mahua cinema, these are also interactions between the national and the transnational. These films, in one way or the other, deal with the nation and the national for the Chinese in Malaysia (an issue I elaborate further in the next section). Most Mahua films tell the stories of interpersonal relationships, especially of betrayal and separation among the Chinese protagonists in some locales of Malaysia. Though these stories can take place anywhere, or at least in many places in the world, these are appropriated within the cultural and historical trajectories of a postcolonial nation-space called Malaysia. Gaik C. Khoo argues that though one has to look hard to find the Malaysian identity of these films but when contextualized to the socio-economic changes in recent Malaysian history and landscape in the last 30 years, these films emerge as cosmopolitan and sometimes cosmopolitical Malaysian products. (2007: 231)

Because of such cosmopolitan characteristics of Mahua cinema, the storytelling in these films is very much transnational. They adopt and adapt the methods and metaphors of various foreign, transnational cinemas, mainly of European art cinemas and their recent Asian incursions. After Antonioni, one of the most revered European art cinema authors of the 1960s-70s, died in July 2007, Malaysian film critic Hassan Muthalib exclaimed in an email that Malaysian filmmakers like James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Ho Yuhang are carrying on his tradition (2007a). More direct influences of Taiwan's and Hong Kong's new cinema authors (e.g. Tsai Ming-Liang and Wong Kar-Wai) can be felt when watching most Mahua films. While James Lee is called 'Malaysia's Tsai Ming-Liang' by the fellow filmmaker Amir Muhammad,^v Gaik C. Khoo (2007: 234) specifies the influences of Godard, Ming Liang, and Kar Wai in James Lee's films (in *Ah Beng Returns*, *Room to Let* and *Teatime with John*, respectively). Lee himself admitted that his 'film-worldview' changed after he watched Kar-Wai's *Days of Being Wild* in the mid-1990s (Fadzil 2005). Tan Chui Mui also confessed that she is influenced by Taiwanese writers (Khoo 2007: 237 and 244).

As I watched most films by Lee, Chui Mui, and Khoo Eng Yow, I noted how they are engaged in portraying the problems of (mis)communication among people, by showing some Chinese protagonists in a Malaysian setting. The protagonists are unglued characters (sometimes living in the same house) with no clear goal. The narrative itinerary they follow is quite arbitrary, or at least illogical in a worldly sense. Rather the mundane, everyday activities of the protagonists are repeatedly shown and emphasized in a bid to eschew the clear-cut characterisation and storytelling conventions of mainstream cinemas (e.g. Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Bollywood). These films are full of chance encounters and 'dead times' (that is, when nothing happens on the screen that may add something to the narrative logic). In most cases, these films offer no happy ending or sometimes, end abruptly.

All these alternative, and to some extent avant-garde, techniques of filmic storytelling in the works of Lee, Chui Mui, and Khoo Eng Yow make one note how religiously they follow the cinematic practices of Antonioni, Ming-Liang, Kar-Wai and other art cinema authors. These non-mainstream, counter-cinema film authors are longstanding favourites in film festivals, art-house venues, and, more recently, among the art cinema connoisseurs who wants to own and repeatedly view the DVDs of these master filmmakers' works.

The offbeat cinematic methods utilized in Mahua cinema films are of course related to the possible means of circulation and the possible venues of exhibition of these films. These films, often with only an English title but no Malay or Chinese title, are rarely screened in Malaysian towns except Kuala Lumpur and Penang. In the end of 2007, there were only three e-cinemas in these two towns where these films can be screened, though not all Mahua films get released in these venues. Lee says, "whether it (my film) will ever get screened locally is not a problem for me. To get your films screened in cinemas, you have a responsibility. They open cinemas for business, not for you to screw up their place. I'll just

try to find some other way to screen it” (Lim 2005: 14). On another occasion, Lee says, “when I was giving a talk [at a University], they said, ‘we’ve heard about all these indie films... but how can we get to watch them? ... I told them, it’s time that the audience becomes more proactive and look for us instead” (Fadzil 2005). One may feel that on both occasions, James Lee seems to admit that his (and other Mahua) films are more visible in ‘proactive’ transnational distribution circuits than inside Malaysia. These Chinese-language ‘Malaysian’ films equipped with English subtitles are mostly (targeted to be) shown in international film festivals, rather than in local cinemas. Actually, almost all the digital films by the Chinese Malaysian filmmakers have been shown in various international film festivals of Asia (e.g. Hong Kong, Singapore, Pusan, Bangkok, Delhi, Tokyo), Europe (e.g. Rotterdam, Karlovy Vary, Oberhausen, Fribourg, Nantes, Vesoul, Dauville, Torino) and North America (e.g. Seattle, New York Asian, Montreal World, Toronto, Vancouver) in the last few years. Some of the films also received major awards. For example, the Tiger award at Rotterdam this year (2008) and in 2007 went to two Mahua films: *Love Conquers All* (2007) and *Pocket Full of Flower* (2008). *Kolam* (The Pool) received an award in Toronto in 2007.

In other words, Mahua films are aimed to address a transnational audience. Gaik C. Khoo identified this audience of Malaysian independent cinema as a global civil society sharing a sense of humanism in a cosmopolitan context (2007: 232-33). However, the global audiences armed with a general notion of humanism, but being unaware of the particular conditions of/in Malaysia, may not always comprehend a Mahua film. For example, James Lee said that the critics at the Torino international film festival interpreted *The Beautiful Washing Machine* “as how capitalist, consumerist culture contributes to the breakdown and dysfunction of Asian families. That was not my intention at all...” (Lim, 2005: 14). Such misunderstanding of the particularities of a Malaysian Chinese film, however, strengthens my view that the Mahua cinema, being produced in pseudo-democratic, developmentalist, and multi-racial but ethnocentric national conditions of Malaysia but circulated in the global world for consumption by a cosmopolitan civil society, functions as a transnational public sphere operating at the interface of the national and the transnational. These films produced at the margin of a national film industry, and circulated mostly outside the national borders to a non-Malaysian audience, address the global citizens of today’s world in a manner as if these films create a common communicative space for both its Malaysian producer and transnational consumers.

Malaysian Digital Film Culture as an ‘Inauthentic’ Chinese Cinema: Imagining a ‘Malaysian’ Malaysia and the Chineseness in/of Malaysia

In the last section of the paper, I locate the non-Malay characteristics, that is the Chineseness of/in Malaysian independent cinema. Here I ask: may these recent filmic ventures of Chinese Malaysian filmmakers be seen as a new Chinese cinema? And, how to locate the ‘Chineseness’ in/of these films? If the Chinese Malaysian films can be seen as

another, emerging transnational Chinese cinema, how does it negotiate the Chineseness of and in it?

The ‘Chineseness’ of the Malaysian Chinese and in turn the representation of China and the Chinese in the recent Chinese-language films of Malaysia is ambiguous at the least. This ambivalence is palpable on various counts. First, one can be reminded that the Chinese migrants who came to Malaya, a predominantly non-Chinese or “even anti-Chinese part of the world” (Clammer 2002: 142) in the nineteenth century were not a homogeneous group. Rather, they came from various parts of China and brought in their different dialects and occupational skills (the Hokkiens, the merchants; the Teochews, the agriculturists; the Cantonese and the Hakkas, the artisans and the Hainanese, the domestic servants). John Clammer locates dialects as the binding force among the Chinese of diverse origins in Malaya:

[D]ialect and place of origin emerged as the two possible foci of social organization amongst [Chinese] migrants of very diverse origins...because of the very functional reason that most migrants...could only communicate with those who spoke the same dialect. (2002: 143)

So the community we are readily referring to as the Malaysian Chinese is highly segmented and such an umbrella term to denote them may prove to be quite misleading.

Secondly, since the idea of ‘Chineseness’ is always ambivalent and in most cases, one’s geographic location (mainland China) and language (Mandarin) have been utilized to clarify such ambivalences, the Chineseness of the Malaysian Chinese becomes more questionable. Rey Chow locates how Mandarin has been normalized as the standard ‘Chinese’ language, and points out that, “those who are ethnically Chinese but who, for historical reasons, have become linguistically distant or dispossessed are, without exception, deemed inauthentic and lacking” (Chow 1998: 11-12). In this way, the Chinese migrants and their descendants who were born in Malaya/Malaysia and lived there for generations can readily be grouped as ‘inauthentic’ Chinese. Such an ‘inauthentic’ Chinese author, Huang Jingshu recalls his experience in mainland China:

Born in a place other than the land of my ancestors, I am a *Huaqiao* (overseas Chinese); I was labelled as an overseas student when studying at the university; as a foreigner when applying for visa; as an illegal worker when working; and as the first batch of ‘fujian’ immigrants applying for citizenship... (1994: 3-4, cited in Kok Chung 2005: 46).

In other words, the Chinese filmmakers of Malaysia would never be treated as the *proper* Chinese because of their distanced links with mainland China and the language of Mandarin. However, these impure Chinese citizens in Malaysia have been and are always treated as the ‘Chinese’ in Malaysia. Rey Chow notes that in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia, the ‘inauthentic’ Chinese are discriminated against “by not being

allowed to *forget* that they are Chinese” (1998: 12). Ien Ang, herself a Chinese from Indonesia, calls such treatment “the dominant culture’s classificatory practice, operating as a territorializing power highly effective as marginalizing the other” (1998: 224).

Being caught in such an ironic circumstance described by Chow and Ang, the Chinese Malaysian filmmakers do not want to call themselves Chinese or mark their films as Chinese films, let alone put their films alongside other transnational Chinese cinemas. Gaik C. Khoo correctly points out that “they would prefer to be known for their contribution to the medium of film and visual story-telling rather than be representative of their ethnic minority group” (2007: 231). For example, James Lee, an ‘inauthentic’ Chinese (as he was born in Ipoh in Malaysia and his mother tongue is Cantonese, not Mandarin) filmmaker leading the independent cinema of Malaysia vehemently opposes the idea of calling himself a Chinese filmmaker. When he was asked if he is “advancing the cinematic voice of the Chinese in Malaysia”, he said, “no, I’m not comfortable with that perception... I don’t think it’s my job to portray Malaysia or the Chinese” (Lim 2005: 14).

Interestingly, in the same interview, Lee admits his ‘Chineseness’ and its influence on his filmmaking:

Yes, (my films) can happen anywhere with Chinese people. It’s not deliberate. ... When I work with Chinese actors, I can communicate with them clearly what I want.... My last three films were in Chinese because it’s what’s easiest for me to do. ... I see things a lot in a Chinese way. I can’t escape my upbringing. My parents didn’t study overseas, I didn’t study overseas so it’s a very local [Malaysian] Chinese way of seeing things. (Lim 2005: 14)

When I interviewed another Chinese Malaysian filmmaker, Chris Chong Chan Fui, he also voiced a similar opinion: “Malaysian Chinese filmmakers portray ‘Chinese’ world because that is what they know about and know well” (Raju 2007).

Therefore I would argue that the Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers are making filmic imaginations of China through transnational Mahua cinema films. Arjun Appadurai pointed out back in 1990: “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (1990: 5). Therefore director Ang Lee when asked about his construction of ‘China’ in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, easily commented that “the China he envisioned was a fantasy China of his boyhood dreams” (Chan 2003: 59). In the same vein, the Chinese Malaysians through their filmic imaginations become a part of what Chris Berry termed as “some of the ‘Chinas’ that are making movies as collective agency other than the nation-state” (1998: 147).

Drawing on Kim Soyoungh's concept of 'geo-political fantasy' (2007a), I argue that the Chinese Malaysian filmmakers like James Lee, Chui Mui, and Khoo Eng Yow create a geopolitical fantasy on screen. The de-territorialized imagined community that they demonstrate in/through their films is a version of 'China', a utopian 'China' that no more exists or possibly never existed. Though they may not (feel easy to) admit this explicitly, by looking at their films more closely, I find that this imagined geopolitical space may even be located as a 'Malaysian China'. In the words of Ien Ang:

Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside. It varies from place to place, molded by the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living. There are...many different Chinese identities, not one. (1998: 205)

Therefore, the contemporary digital film practices in Malaysia need to be seen as a part of new ways of living for the Malaysian Chinese in the 2000s. This trend as a counter-discourse can be located against the Malayanization of film and screen media as well as of strict State control of media in contemporary Malaysia. This cinema creates the visibility of the Other(s) of/in Malaysian nation. These are instances as to how the Chinese, as the Other of Malay-Muslims of/in Malaysia, encountered and responded to a monolithic Malayanized notion of Malaysian national identity. These films are posing the obvious question: what is Malaysia as a nation and who are the Malaysians? Going against the homogeneous notion of Malayness/Malaysianness as advocated by the State since the early 1970s, these films demonstrate racial multiplicities of/within Malaysian identity. In this way, Mahua cinema as a hybrid, Chinese cinema in contemporary Malaysia is imagining a 'Malaysian' (read pluralist) Malaysia.

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ⁱ Drug trafficking is punished by the death penalty in Malaysia; visitors are normally treated with this announcement just before the plane lands in a Malaysian airport.

ⁱⁱ Hassan Muthalib discusses the works of the 'fourth generation Indian filmmakers' in a to-be-published article. Most articles on Malaysian indies are either on an individual filmmaker, a particular film, or on the whole trend.

ⁱⁱⁱ When celebrating the 50 year of independence in 2007, the exhibitions and newspaper in Malaysia proudly showed the photos of Malay, Chinese and Indian leaders in airports during 1956-7. They are either going to or returning from London to negotiate the terms of independence for Malaysia.

^{iv} Malaysian censor board asked for 25 cuts in this film; however it won awards in Hawaii and Delhi (Muthalib and Tuck Cheong, 2002).

^v Author's observation at the meeting with Tsai Ming-Liang in Kuala Lumpur in June 2007.