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Representation of Urban Space and Persistence of Memory in Malaysian Chinese Films¹

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Abstract

The concept of space in this study is signified as placement of persistence of memory for Malaysian cinema-goers. This study looks at spatial conception of memory, particularly in terms of urban space depicted in the top three box-office earning Chinese-language features films. It examines top three box-office earning Chinese-language features films -- The Journey (2014), Ola Bola (2016), and Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes (2012) -- produced and released in Malaysia up to present. Screen images and narratives contribute to a collective knowledge and memory of space and places in the city. Images of settlements (i.e. Chinatown, Chinese new villages) on films give symbolic meanings to spaces by defining purposes and activities for a large audience, and by simplifying and interpreting reality for cinemagoers. This study focuses on critical possibilities of cinema believed to be emerging precisely through its entanglements with urban setup. The Chinese father portrayed in The Journey does not allow his daughter to stay with her English boyfriend at the same bedroom before their marriage. In Ola Bola, the football players fight for their country regardless of their race and religion. Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes depicts Malaysian Chinese in a Chinese community prepare to receive the auspicious God Of Fortune on the eve of the Lunar New Year -- the typical Chinese tradition in Malaysia. Space and agency configuration of narrative in the films are diegesis. Narrative in the selected three films serves as a cultural tool that aids spectators' comprehension and relation of information about the past.

Keywords: Malaysian cinema, cinema studies, Malaysian Chinese film, space in film

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia where Chinese are the second largest ethnic group and have well established cultural representation, Chinese are generally not concerned with how to express identities without offending Malays in various forms of cultural activities. Chinese language becomes a 'code' to differentiate its ethnic group's film productions from the others'. The history of Malaysian Chinese film testifies to the tremendous significance of the Chinese diaspora to the development of not only ASEAN cinema but also world cinema. At an early stage of the development of Malaysian Chinese film, "the ranks of ethnic Chinese-filmmakers are filled with people who were born in the West, but work in Asia or who were born in Asia, educated in Europe or American and established careers in Hong Kong or Taiwan" (Marchetti, 2011, p. 33). Chiu Keng Guan's *Woohoo!*, which was released in 2010, was touted as the first Chinese-new-year film in Malaysia (Wang, 2017, p. 7). Chiu's films become most expected local Lunar New Year big-screen productions since then. Among the top three box-office earning Malaysian Chinese films, two of them were directed by Chiu, namely *The Journey* (2014) and *Ola Bola* (2016). The other one is *Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes* (2012) directed by Silver Yee. These three films were all released during the festival season of Chinese New Year in Malaysia. These films' stories and their promotional teasers 'appeal to a sense of humanism during the Chinese New Year' (Wang & Chen, 2017, p. 4).

Unequal power relation, nevertheless, in Malaysia film industry restrain the development of local Chinese cinema. In his *Transnational Trajectories in Contemporary East Asian Cinemas*, Lim (2013) argued that Chinese Malaysian filmmakers "may align his or her filmmaking with the umbrella label of 'transnational Chinese cinema' rather than with the national cinema of Malaysia" (p. 26). Malaysian Chinese filmmakers are struggling for their position within local film industry. Chiu Keng Guan expressed that, in the interview¹ with the author, local Chinese film industry is growing fast although obstacles can be frustrating; eight years ago, there is even no local Chinese films were screened in the cinema. Chiu believed that those imported Chinese films from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan occupy the screening schedule during Chinese New Year in Malaysia. These narratives definitely paved the way for a sense of translocal Chinese cultural identity, since their cinematic trajectories for Malaysian Chinese audiences are inevitably transitional and intra-Asian rather than merely located within the national milieu.

Hassan Muthalib, a well-known Malaysian film critic, commented that Chinese filmmakers ... are carrying on [Michelangelo Antonioni's] narrative tradition in Malaysia (Zakir, 2017, p. 231). Antonioni particularly used *space* in his film "as his way of being historical and critical, since it is *space* that 'reintroduces an involved, real world ... a fresco comes to be unaware of the world, the more the world intervenes in their personal adventure in order to comment upon it or contradict it from the exterior'" (Brunette, 1998, p. 45). The concept of *space* in this study is signified as placement of persistence of memory for Malaysian cinema-goers. This study looks at spatial conception of memory, particularly in terms of urban space depicted in the top three box-office earning Chinese-language features films. 2014 witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese film productions while only seven local Chinese films were released in 2013. Twenty-one local Chinese-language features films were release in 2014. Chiu's *The Journey* was one of

them. The three films in this study represent local films that were 'exceeding expectations in our box office environment' (Chew, 2013, para 5).

Cinematic cities depicted in the three films would be a discursive mechanism that foregrounds the multiplicity and heterogeneity of space and necessitates human intervention by ways of narrativization and theorization, as 'concept of space can be seen as a continuation of style' (Teo, 2013, p. 133) which projects persistence of memory among declining populations of Malaysian Chinese audiences. Space is itself cold and impersonal. However, these films display distinguishable space in which the questions of history, memory and identity are rehearsed assiduously. The three films in this study were all screened during the Chinese New Year. These film productions comprised entirely of the signature crowd-pleasing comedies which timed for release to catch the Chinese New Year festive crowd.

II. METHODOLOGY

Films are visual and auditory texts that enable a holistic understanding of the relationship between collective memories of spaces and physical places depicted in the films, rendering an opportunity to identify how Malaysian Chinese filmmakers strike a nerve of Malaysian Chinese film industry. Representation of cinematic city depicted in the selected Malaysian Chinese films will be examined. Content analysis is used to examine the manifest or latent content of persistence of memory towards spaces.

III. DISCUSSION

3.1 Images of Urban Space in Malaysian Chinese Films

According to the information provided by the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (abbreviated FINAS), since 2011, Malaysia produced sixty seven (67) Chinese-language features films (see Figure 1). Fifty three (53) out of them set different cities as their backdrops. For instance, the 2017 family film *You Mean the World to Me* (Saw Teong Hin) is set against the background of a film director's life in Penang city; the 2015 gangster film *Kepong Gangster 2* (Teng Bee) depicted gangster fighting happened in Kepong city; the 2014 family-oriented action comedy *Bullets over Petaling Street* (Sampson Yuen and Ho Shih Phin) depicts a female leader traitor at Chinatown in Kuala Lumpur; and the 2013 comedy *The Wedding Diary 2* (Adrian Teh) took place in Singapore. Cities provides for transnational flows of films and people in a particular way. The local Chinese films become the main feature of the presentation as the Chinese audience waited in anticipation for their locality to be shown on screen. Locations were always familiar to them.

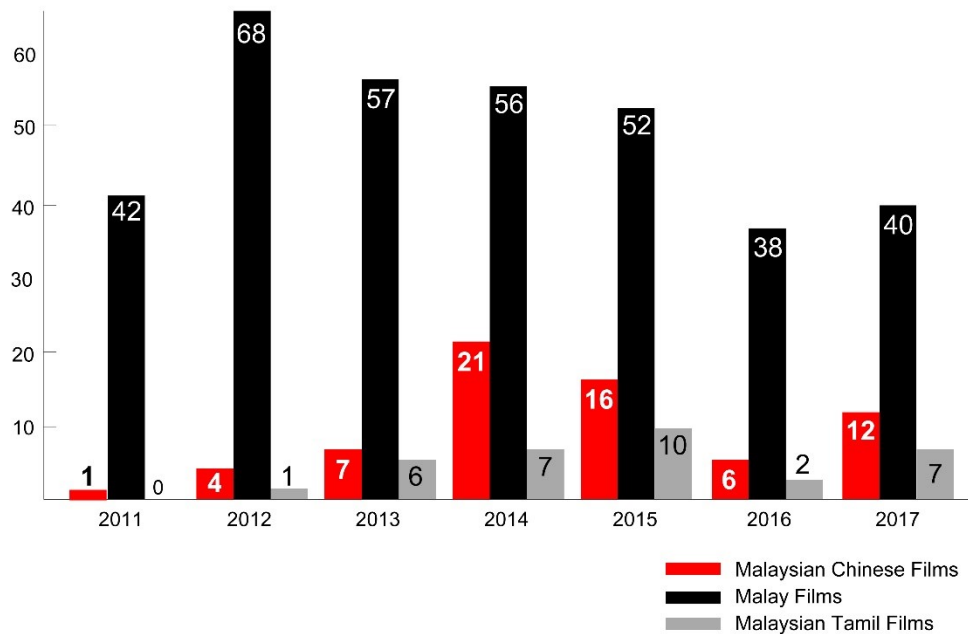


Fig 1. Malaysia feature film productions from 2011 to 2017

Precisely, these films invariably involve the ways film and urban space produce not only something real but also a compelling exchange with local audiences. Many of them illustrated 'urban archaeology' that 'uncover repressed historical and alternative futures' (p. 4). *The Journey* did not cover most scenes in the cities, however, those scenes in the cities provide plot points which reshape the relationship (e.g., father and daughter, father and son-in-law) among the protagonists and spin the actions around in another direction. Memories of the elderly raise another aspect of the intergenerational conflict and show how complicated intergenerational relations are in the film. This film focuses on Uncle Chuan (played by Lee Sai Peng) who is a conservative father with a rigid set of rules. When his daughter Bee (played by Joanne Yew) returns home after spending most of her formative years in England with her fiancée Benji (played by Ben Pfeiffer), Uncle Chuan refuses to give his blessing unless they follow the Chinese tradition to prepare their wedding in their hometown. The first day Benji stays at Bee's home, Uncle Chuan does not allow him to sleep at his daughter's room since they are not yet married. Instead, he has to sleep on a tiny and broken foldable bed at the prayer room. The space in this scene is given the meaning of Chinese traditional values on female-and-male relationship before marriage. In the same film, Penang—the city where most of Uncle's Chuan's old classmates' live—provide a space for the daughter, the son-in-law and the father to re-look at and appreciate each other's stands and concerns.

The narrative is enriched with local religious rituals (i.e., the blessing rope, funeral ritual) and urban rhapsodies. Uncle Chuan determines to make a hot air balloon at the city school, which was his deceased schoolmate's wish. Locations where the hot air balloon reaches are like an

anthology of his memories in adolescence. Although he and his classmates are no longer young and energetic, they showcase determination and loyalty by committing to memory. Chiu Keng Guan expressed, during the interview with the author², this film is predominantly about the father-daughter relationship. Penang provides ample opportunities to visualize improvement in relations as many of Uncle Chuan's old friends living in this city could help to diffuse tension. In the interview with the author³, Eric Yeong—the director of cinematography for *The Journey*—explained that the locations include Penang, Kedah and Ipoh, however the narrative only focuses on the events happened in Penang by neglecting the definition of another two cities. The protagonists eventually embrace harmony, concord, and compromise while Uncle Chua is massing everyone for making the hot air balloon in Penang.

3.2 Simplifying and Interpreting Reality In Malaysian Chinese Films

Images of settlements (i.e. Chinese new villages, Chinatown) on films give symbolic meanings to spaces by defining purposes and activities for a large audience, and by simplifying and interpreting reality for cinemagoers. *Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes* is an excellent example. This film depicts Malaysian Chinese in a Chinese community prepare to receive the auspicious God of Fortune on the eve of the Lunar New Year – the typical Chinese tradition in Malaysia. The main character is a not-so-bright security guard who is usually being bullied by a group of rich brats with luxury cars over their parking fees at an open car park. The Chinese new village⁴ portrayed in the film provides the principal social organism of protection and also economic participation in the Malaysian city. This space reflects not only the ethnic concentrations in various parts of the city, but also how the families in enclaves functions as places of unity and harmony, importantly, as micro-society.

By providing ethnic products and religious practice, the Chinese new village is defined as a harmonious community. Spatial relations are integral to religious practice. In the beginning of the film, every Chinese family is waiting for the right moment to receive the auspicious God of Fortune. At the end, the protagonists' house had been painted in bright yellow; and it is the place they have family reunion dinner on the even of the Lunar New Year. The last crane shot visualizes the family praying to God together. Home is associated with pleasant memories, intimate situations, a place of warmth and protective security for family members. In contrast, Kuala Lumpur city in the film is defined as aggregations having fraudulent conduct, offence, and mistrust.

The family is so pervasive a social institution that in films that seemingly have little or nothing to do with it, the absence, particularly of parents, is often conspicuous. The time-travel comedy—*Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes*—stresses on parent's responsibility by allowing the main character's father experience future tense with his son after making a wish. While the

² The interview was conducted at the author's office at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, in Penang, Malaysia, on 18th November 2015.

³ The interview was conducted at Xiamen University Malaysia, in Sepang, Malaysia, on 28th June 2018.

⁴ New villages, also known as Chinese new villages are settlements created during the waning days of British rule over Malaysia in the mid-1950s.

traditional family system within urban ethnic enclaves in Malaysia served a purpose, they are in some sense undone by the success of their economic and social achievements. Those characters living in the city center are depicted in a negative view. A group of rich brats with luxury cars bully the main character without paying parking fee. The gold shop owner who requested guardianship for normal documents with a lowest service cost actually delivers two boxes of gold that were robbed unfortunately.

As third or fourth generations of Chinese migrants in Malaysia are availed of the benefits of education and economic growth, they often express their accession by highlighting their 'socio-economic success' (Lee & Leo, 2012, p. 166). This film illustrates a grass-root family living at Chinese New Village in a rural area. Those plain wooden single-storey houses are virtually contiguous with each other. The scene in which the main character greets to every neighbour indicates the good-neighbourliness and friendliness within the unique Chinese community. Such feeling is only conveyed in this particular space, not in the city. The location does not only tell their socio-economic status, but also provides a contrast with those urbanites (i.e., retail salesperson).

3.3 Space as a Sociological Imagination in the Films

Spaces in city depicted in these films are generated by race and ethnic relations and are a sociological fact that forms itself spatially. Reynaud (2001) defined 'a social space as a field of objective relations between positions occupied by social agents' (p. 127). The social space in the film implies a hierarchy in the classification of agents, "a kind of 'dominant-dominated' relationship" (Reynaud, 2001, p. 127). The Chinese father portrayed in *The Journey* does not allow his daughter to stay with her English boyfriend at the same bedroom before their marriage while the daughter returns home in *Camera Highlands*. In *Ola Bola*, the football players fight for their country regardless of their race and religion. However, in a team, three major ethnic representatives (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) are all well characterized. *Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes* depicts Malaysian Chinese in a Chinese community prepare to receive the auspicious God of Fortune on the eve of the Lunar New Year – the typical Chinese tradition in Malaysia.

Space is not only encumbered by the idea of rigidity, it is also reminiscent of ethnic argumentation in Malaysia society for decades. The Chinese football captain and the Indian doorkeeper depicted in *Ola Bola* are both from humble family backgrounds. The football captain earns a living by rubber tapping; the Indian doorkeeper's father raises a family with his limited revenue. The visual space (i.e., rubber plantation, coconut forest) in which struggles of Chinese and Indian population become visible is created as a form of perceiving social conditions in the late 1970s in Malaysia. The football players are provided a shared accommodation while the coach brings them to an intensive military training. Their personal space bubble has been changed. It in a ways helps to build trust among the team players. The football court eventually becomes the space in which there is fierce competition based on true events⁵ involving the

⁵ *Ola Bola* is a fictional retelling of true events involving the national football's team brazen journey towards qualifying for the 1980 Olympics held in Moscow, then of the Soviet Union. The team did not make it to Moscow, as the

national football's team brazen journey towards qualifying for the 1980 Olympics held in Moscow, and in which the players neglect the difference of socioeconomic status among each other.

IV. CONCLUSION

Space and agency configuration of narrative in the films are diegesis. Narrative in the selected three films serves as a cultural tool that aids spectators' comprehension and relation of information about the past. Space predominates over time in film narration. China Town, Chinese schools, Chinese New Village, and the former National Stadium depicted in the films are more than just physical location, but are used in segments of the film that refer to persistence of memory among local Chinese population.

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Malaysian government made the decision to boycott the Games in protest of the Soviet Union's invasion against Afghanistan.