

Spectral History: Unsettling Nation Time in *The Last Communist*

Fiona Lee
The English Program, The Graduate Center
City University of New York, USA

Abstract

The Last Communist (*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*) traces the biographical narrative of Chin Peng, the exiled Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya who led the armed uprising against the British during the Malayan Emergency. Going against the grain of official history, the film presents the communist-led uprising as contributing to the anti-colonial nationalist struggle. This essay argues that the film's significance lies not merely in its retrieval of a marginalized perspective of national history. Subverting the conventions of the documentary genre, the film eschews interviews or archival footage of its eponymous subject, withholding him from sight to articulate the figure of the spectral communist. Moreover, the film stages scenes of everyday life as a site for conjuring the past in the present, a method of historical knowledge production that constitutes a translation of time. The figuring of a spectral historical subject, as signaled by a visual absence and the summoning of the past in the present, unsettles the linear, chronological time of national history. In doing so, the film not only presents a critique of the national narrative's ideological project of modernity, but conceives of history as a political act of redefining the historical present.

Keywords

everyday life, Malaysia, national history, postcoloniality, temporality, translation

The Spectral Communist

The Last Communist (*Lelaki Komunis Terakhir*), a 2006 documentary film directed by Amir Muhammad, has the dubious honor of being the first Malaysian-made movie to be banned in the country. The film traces the biographical narrative of Chin Peng, the exiled Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) who led the guerrilla uprising against the British, prompting the declaration of emergency rule that lasted for twelve years (1948-60). Although the Censorship Board had initially approved the film for a limited cinema release, a series of articles published in *Berita Harian*, a national daily inclined toward Malay supremacist ideology, compelled the Home Affairs Minister to reverse the decision. Written by journalists who had not viewed the film, the articles accused the film of glorifying communism, as well as threatening national harmony and security. Tinged with racist undertones, the articles further criticized the filmmaker, a Malay-Muslim, for choosing to make a film about a Chinese person and insinuated that the film would incite inter-racial violence between the Chinese and Malays.¹ The ban generated a public outcry, as well as sparked a lively discussion in the media about censorship and national history. As a result, a closed screening of the film for Members of Parliament was held to reassess the ban—and this event was documented by Amir Muhammad in a short film, *18MP*.² The MPs' general response to the film, regardless of their position on the ban, was puzzlement. Home Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad remarked that the film's lack of violence was worrisome as it misleadingly suggested that Chin Peng was not a violent person. The Opposition MP, Kulasegaran, expressed disappointment that the controversial figure was not more prominently featured, and angrily complained that the film was "more than boring."

This sense of bewilderment was presumably a result of the film's unconventional approach toward history. Self-described as a "semi musical road movie documentary," the film embarks on a cross-country journey, tracing Chin Peng's life story through the various places in which he once lived. Eschewing interviews and archival footage of the iconic figure, the film subverts the generic codes of historical documentary by deliberately withholding its eponymous subject

¹ See Oleh Akmal Abdullah, "Filem *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir* Untuk Rakyat Malaysia?" ("The Last Communist: For the People of Malaysia?"), available at <<http://lastcommunist.blogspot.com/2006/05/from-berita-harian-4-may.html>> (accessed 16 Aug. 2012).

² My thanks to Peter J. Bloom for drawing my attention to this short film and for generously providing me with a copy.

from sight. In lieu of his anticipated presence, the film interviews ordinary people residing in the locales featured. While a few of the interviewed subjects touched upon recollections of life during the Malayan Emergency, others discussed their present livelihoods and other matters unrelated to history. The press campaign's inflammatory remarks and the film's ban had created the impression that it would present a historical revelation that would undermine the political status quo. These expectations were confounded not only because the film did not do so, but also because it seemed utterly uninterested in the idea that there was a suppressed historical truth to be revealed.

Indeed, as many have pointed out, the film presents a historical perspective that is readily available to the public. Following the private screening, the Minister of Culture, Rais Yatim, acknowledged that the book on which the film was based, the CPM leader's memoir *Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History*, was and remains legally in circulation in Malaysia. However, the minister suggested that the film is weak precisely because it offers "no new facts" (*"tidak ada fakta baru"*), an assessment he artfully framed as an aesthetic evaluation to sidestep commenting on the ban. Dismissing *The Last Communist* for its amateur production quality and heavy use of captions, the minister sought to discredit the film by suggesting that its aesthetic values did not match the nation's modern image, and that it fell short of contributing to the progress of the national film industry.

Yet, the very characteristics of the film criticized by the minister are those that are heralded in the past decade by international film festivals as part of the "Malaysian New Wave" (see Wong 91-97). Generally speaking, the "indie" films which have gained international visibility through the festival circuit as Malaysian cinema not only have minuscule audiences at home but have a vexed relationship with the idea of national cinema. In the case of *The Last Communist*, which had its world premiere at the Berlinale, its censorship at home has become part of its presentational narrative abroad: festival sites are cast as benevolent arenas of free speech for filmmakers originating from repressive countries. The international visibility afforded by prestigious film venues is often leveraged to shame the authoritarian government at home, thereby fashioning the image of an unevenly developed modern nation—economically advanced yet culturally backward. Within this narrative of modernity, *Berita Harian's* anti-communist fear-mongering press campaign is treated by many as an anachronism: the racial ideology underpinning the obsessive revival of a past enmity for present-day political power play is cast as a symptom of the postcolonial nation's temporal lag.

However, the film's ban, though adding to Malaysia's appalling record of suppressing freedom of expression, is not merely an affirmation of the postcolonial nation's stunted political development. The success of the press campaign in petitioning for the film's ban is also evidence of the fact that Cold War structures of feeling and knowing have survived after its formal end, and that their attendant subjectivities are being reproduced in racialized terms. It is often noted that the racial formations of postcolonial Malaysia are an inheritance of British colonial rule. The response generated by the film thus presents an opportunity to explore the profound impact of the Cold War on the formation of the postcolonial nation-state.

Examining the history of East Asia, Kuan-Hsing Chen argues that processes of decolonization—conceived not only as the establishment of a sovereign nation-state, but more broadly as “the attempt of the previously colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically”—were impeded by the Cold War (3). Chen's argument is worth considering in the case of Malaysia. Operating on the premise that the work of decolonization requires confronting legacies of the Cold War in the historical present, I suggest that the lingering effects of the past, whether colonialism or the Cold War, cannot simply be dismissed as anachronisms that are symptomatic of a cultural lag, as they are within modernity's framework of historical progress. Rather, they require a different conception of history. Towards this end, Harry Harootunian's observations on the global historical present provide a useful starting point: “The surfacing of fundamentalisms in our time, echoing a long and often suppressed history of struggle, represents not so much a rupture from the received order of time but rather a *repressed revenant*. Its reappearance reminds us of a historical perspective joined to the present that has always provided the stage for a constant enactment of the past in the present” (476; emphasis added).

The figure of the repressed revenant recasts modernity's temporal lag (“a rupture from the received order of time”) as a form of historical uncanny. This move points to the fixed spatial categories underlying modernity's notion of historical progress, which, put crudely, invariably distinguish the modern from the pre-modern and assign them respectively as the West and the rest, the Global North and South, and so on. Invoking a sense of haunting, the image of the repressed revenant gestures toward what might be called spectral history, a mode of historical practice that contends with temporal unevenness instead of displacing it as spatial difference. This resembles what Avery Gordon describes as “haunting”: “those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your

bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes to view" (xvi).

As I will demonstrate, *The Last Communist* stages history as a site of haunting in that it begins with the premise that the past commingles with the present. The film's most eloquent formulation of history as haunting is its omission of any audio recordings or visual images of Chin Peng in favor of a presentation of his biography in a series of captions overlaid on contemporary scenes of everyday life. Moreover, the film stages scenes of everyday life as a site for conjuring the past in the present, a method of historical knowledge production that constitutes a translation of time. I call this absent figure "the spectral communist," which serves as a metonym for history as haunting. Through a reading of this film, I argue that the figure of the spectral communist is a means toward generating a historical practice that unsettles the linear chronological time of the nation narrative.

Benedict Anderson has famously argued that it was a historical shift in time consciousness, facilitated by the emergence of print capitalism, that made possible the imagining of the political community of the nation. The rise of print capitalism introduced a secular, modern conception of simultaneity which differed from what Walter Benjamin called Messianic time, "a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present" (qtd. in Anderson 24). In its place, the spread of the novel and newspaper gave form to Benjamin's idea of "'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is . . . transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar" (Anderson 24). However, as Harootunian argues, Anderson's concept of the nation as a community bound by temporal simultaneity is effectively a spatialization of time, an articulation of the nation as a temporally homogeneous space through the narrative of development.

The case of Malaysia—and, perhaps, of postcolonial nations in general—suggests that the national narrative of development seeks to conceal the aporia of time that constitutes the nation. The postcolonial nation is fundamentally inscribed by an aporia of time insofar as its inauguration is marked by rupture, a formal separation from its colonial past, even as it represents a continuity in terms of its inheritance and inhabitation of colonial structures of governance. In Malaysia, this aporia is materialized in the constitutionalization of a hierarchical citizenship defined along colonial taxonomies of race, the outcome of a political struggle waged by the nationalist multiracial elite and conceded by the British to protect its economic interests. The formalization of this racial hierarchy is often viewed as a symptom of the postcolonial nation's illiberalism, of its being culturally backward.

Yet, to read it as such is to disavow the genealogical roots of the colonial enterprise and, more broadly, processes of racialization as constitutive of the experience of modernity. Indeed, the postcolonial state's formalized racial hierarchy provides a readily exploitable base for capitalist accumulation strategies as well as conceals the latter's systemic production of unevenness. The ensuing decades of civil and political unrest fermented by this constitutional inequality, culminating in the 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur, led to the imposition of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Establishing a set of race-based affirmative action policies favoring the Malays, the NEP, as Thomas Williamson puts it, "aimed to remove ethnic identification in the economy by ethnicizing nearly all facets of it" (407). The NEP introduced the narrative of economic nationalism to justify its race-based affirmative policies, a nationalism that carves out the economic as the domain in and through which the ethnically divided nation can exercise and develop its collective unity. These policies, the rationale goes, would not only serve as a stopgap for correcting the economic disparities distributed along racial lines; they would also facilitate the capitalist development of the national economy. From the 1980s onwards, under the helm of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, policy initiatives such as Malaysia Incorporated and, later, Vision 2020, extended this narrative to justify economic liberalization programs, projecting a future ideal of a unified multiethnic nation through the means of capitalist development.

The ideology of modernization imposes a linear chronological time in which the implementation of economic liberalization programs is presented as a means of breaking away from a past marred by inter-ethnic violence and as the path toward achieving a racially equal society. The 1997 Asian financial crisis, however, revealed the ideological contradictions of the state's racial and economic policies. Moreover, it revitalized public debates on race and national belonging given that the affirmative action policies would remain indefinitely in place while the historical progress promised by capital appears to be perpetually postponed. The period of political upheaval triggered by the economic crisis also marked the renewed interest amongst filmmakers, writers, and artists in anti-colonial leftist movements in the 1940s to 1960s, a time when discourses on race and national belonging were intertwined with debates on political economic ideologies.³

In highlighting the marginalized contributions of leftist movements toward anti-colonial nationalism, films like *The Last Communist* pave the way for examining the violently foreclosed possibilities of national collectivity envisioned by leftist movements. Occasioned by contemporary crisis, this return to a past that

³ For an overview of films on this subject, see Khoo.

could have been is a means of redefining the historical present against the grain of the ideological project of modernity.

The significance of *The Last Communist's* conception of history can be further elucidated when the film is viewed in comparison with another documentary on a similar subject. Also released in 2006, *I Love Malaya* focuses on Chin Peng's lawsuit against the Malaysian government for denying him entry to his country of birth, a violation of the 1989 Hatyai Peace Accord that the state had signed with the CPM to signal the formal cessation of hostilities. On their website, the filmmakers explain that the lawsuit led them to hear about the former guerrilla fighters settled in the Peace Villages in southern Thailand, a number of whom were born in Singapore and Malaysia, but like Chin Peng remain stateless. "Most of what has been written about [Chin Peng] and the communist guerrillas he led," the filmmakers' statement notes, "were from a victor's or rather, an enemy's point of view." The documentary elaborates on the "enemy's point of view" in its interviews with people gathered outside the courthouse where Chin Peng's case was being heard, protesting his right to return, as well as with a survivor of the communist ambush on the Bukit Kepong police station in 1950, whose parents were killed in the attack.⁴ Its man-on-the-street interviews further demonstrate that the public is either generally ignorant of or reticent about discussing the history of the communist uprising. Having presented these mainstream views, the documentary sets out to explore untold perspectives of the Malayan Emergency, recording oral accounts of the ex-guerrillas in Thailand.

Like *The Last Communist*, the documentary embarks on a journey—one that clocks over 5,000 kilometers of traveling between Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand—in pursuit of Chin Peng's side of the story. Although it brings to light perspectives and experiences suppressed by the dominant historical narrative, the documentary maintains a conservative view of history insofar as it reifies the nation. In treating the nation as a given historical category in which to subsume the oral accounts of the ex-guerrillas, the documentary effectively depoliticizes the communist struggle and simply recasts the years of conflict as a form of "reassuring fratricide" (Anderson 201). Derived from a revolutionary song, "I Love My Malaya"—an excerpt of which is performed for the camera by Huang Xueying, an ex-guerrilla—the documentary's title presents the communists as patriots rather

⁴ Although the capture of the police station marked a victory for the CPM, the incident has gained notoriety in large part because among the casualties in the hours-long battle were women and children. The event also looms large in national cultural memory, having been dramatized in the popular historical fiction film *Bukit Kepong*, which takes an anti-communist stance.

than enemies of the state. The dropped “my” is intended to register the irony that there are those like Huang who are only able to enter Malaysia as Thai citizens, as well as to highlight the plight of others who remain stateless exiles, dispossessed of their citizenship rights and barred from entering the country for which they sacrificed tremendously. In doing so, the documentary seeks to disassociate the love for the country from an unquestioning loyalty to the state—not an insignificant point to make in Singapore or Malaysia, where dissent often comes at great personal cost. The concerted effort to humanize the ex-guerrillas is a similar attempt to counter the deeply entrenched anti-communist rhetoric to appeal to audience sympathies. For instance, the documentary emphasizes the ordinary-ness of the lives of the other former guerrillas interviewed—they are fond of their pets; deal with domestic squabbles; fall in and out of love and suffer the heartache of separation from loved ones; wrestle with state bureaucracy, and so on. Citing his advanced age, the documentary also implies that Chin Peng no longer poses a real political threat to the government, but is merely seeking to exercise his right of return, as stipulated in the terms of the 1989 peace accord, to his birthplace.

Yet, in folding the ex-guerrilla accounts into the national narrative in this way, the documentary renders the ex-guerrillas as benign figures whose ideological convictions and militant actions are safely confined in the past. Although the interviews with the party’s Central Committee members highlight the movement’s political aims, with one member in particular presenting a brief critique of contemporary capitalist society, the documentary presents itself as a sympathetic but objective lens, refraining from evaluating or interrogating the views expressed. Its aim being to balance out what is otherwise a heavily one-sided view of history, the documentary’s mode of historiography is “additive”: “it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 396). Put another way, the work of constructing knowledge of the past requires documenting as many perspectives as possible to obtain an understanding of history as comprehensive as possible. The history of the vanquished is thus conceived as gaps within a national narrative to be filled. As a result, the communist struggle is rendered impotent, bearing no relevance whatsoever to contemporary political and social concerns but exists simply as a relic of a bygone era. This notion of history is further amenable to the logic of commodification, as evidenced in the manner in which the communist settlements in southern Thailand have become tourist attractions, where displays of communist paraphernalia and remnants of guerrilla life in the jungle present history as a cultural experience for consumption.

In contrast, *The Last Communist's* staging of the history of the communist-led struggle as a haunting, something not quite confined to the past yet not fully present, intimates that linear successive time is a normative rather than natural substrate, a temporality that is presented as if it were a given to sustain the discourse of national history. Moreover, registering the nation's historical amnesia, Chin Peng's visual absence does not signify a gap in history that the film seeks to fill. Rather, it suggests that his absence in collective memory indexes a discrepant temporality within the hegemonic frame of homogenous empty time.

Temporal Translation

The Last Communist's conjuring of the past to redefine the historical present can be understood as a translation of time, a reading that is indebted to Bliss Cua Lim's work on fantastic cinema and temporal critique. In *Translating Time*, Bliss Cua Lim brings together Henri Bergson's philosophy of time in relation to cinema and Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of secular historiography to argue how fantastic cinema discloses the multiple temporalities incorporated into and homogenized by modern time consciousness. Bergson's philosophy of time is resolutely counterposed against the Newtonian understanding of time as absolute and measurable. Insisting that time is pure duration or a radical multiplicity irreducible to atomized units, Bergson views cinema as producing a "habituated perception" that tricks the spectator into mistaking its mechanized spatialization of time as pure duration itself (B. Lim 58). What the spectator perceives as movement on screen is in fact produced by the mechanical projection of static images at a particular speed—say, twenty-four frames per second—to create the illusion of continuous motion. Disclosing this discrepancy, Bergson's philosophical project aims to surmount the kind of mechanized thinking aptly figured by the cinematic apparatus to more adequately grasp the "pure" character of time and, consequently, the experience of freedom.

Bergson's understanding of time's radical heterogeneity as irreducible to measure and thus fundamentally untranslatable resonates with Chakrabarty's critique of historicism. As Chakrabarty argues, historicism's claim to universality—that everything can be historicized—is premised not just on the notion of time as homogeneous and empty, but as secular as well. Moreover, the modern time consciousness of secular historiography mistranslates the non-secular and the non-modern as pre-modern, positing what is co-present with modernity as its precursor. Despite its corrective impulse toward the imperializing codes of

history, subaltern historiography, Chakrabarty cautions, must similarly contend with the problem of translation given that its very aim is to recognize the subaltern as a historical subject. In other words, it must recognize that its aim of recognizing the subaltern as a historical subject is itself an act of translating what has otherwise been deemed illegible into the dominant codes of secular historiography. Drawing from Vicente L. Rafael's and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the politics of translation, Chakrabarty proposes a practice of translating subaltern lifeworlds into history that highlights the very "scandal" at the heart of its operation (89).⁵ The scandal refers to the shock of the uncanny produced by translation, whereby the application of universal categories such as "history" or "labor" to subalternity defamiliarizes these terms to the extent that it points to their limits and challenges their definitive status.

Notably, Chakrabarty offhandedly comments that fiction and, in a subsequent remark, film are particularly inclined toward producing such scandals of translation: "It is obvious that this nonsociological mode of translation lends itself more easily to fiction, particularly of the nonrealist or magic-realist variety practiced today, than to the secular and realist prose of sociology or history" (86). Bliss Cua Lim explores this claim through her analysis of fantastic cinema, arguing that it performs a temporal translation that discloses "immiscible temporality" (32). Like oil and water which commingle but can never fully mix, immiscible time refers to the co-presence of temporal alterity with homogeneous time that remains unassimilated, which, as Lim argues, ghost films and horror cinema make perceptible.

Similarly, *The Last Communist* borrows from the idiom of fantastic cinema in its figuration of the spectral communist, unsettling the homogeneous empty time in its revival of the past in the present, blurring the distinction between the two. By insisting that traces of the past are discernible in the present, the film refuses the idea that that which has been excised from history has been lost forever. The act of reading in translation, of seeing the everyday as a translation of time, is an act of active conjuration, of summoning ghosts. In staging the repressed past as a form of haunting in the present, the film does not presume to offer a fuller picture of the past by disclosing contents otherwise excised from history as a means of getting a better understanding of the present, of undoing false consciousness. Rather, the film practices a historical methodology that refutes the idea of a fixed past that can be

⁵ The works referred to here are Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 200-25.

decoded to illuminate how the present developed from it. It sees the past as living on in the present, surviving as fragments that unsettle the forward march of homogeneous, empty time. In unsettling the homogeneous empty time of capital and nation, the film does not view subjugated histories as something to be liberated or rescued, as something to be made whole. Instead, these fragments of the past constitute flash points of vulnerability in what is often conceived as the totalizing, hegemonic reach of modern time consciousness.

Everyday Life as Temporal Translation

If its coda is that which most concretely suggests that *The Last Communist* is a film about time, then it also conveys the fact that time cannot be thought separately from labor. Having traveled the length of the peninsula, the film concludes in Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Square on the eve of National Day celebrations where people gather annually, as they did in 1957, when Malaya's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, officially declared the country independent from British rule. Instead of training its camera on the festivities, the film interviews the two workers manning the tower of the historic Sultan Abdul Samad Building, who are responsible for ensuring that the clock strikes at midnight, just as the fireworks display is timed to go off. The image of the workers winding the over-a-century-old clock, sweating behind the scenes as the sound of fireworks and cheers erupts in the square, underscores the uncelebrated labor of the ordinary working class behind the nation's achievements. As the clock bell tolls and the crowd outside breaks into the national anthem, the screen fades to black with captions noting that despite the end of the Cold War and the 1989 peace treaty, Chin Peng remains in exile, unable to return home.

The coda is preceded by a cartoon rendition of the historic 1955 Baling talks. Convened as the transition to postcolonial governance became imminent, the CPM representatives, including Chin Peng, met with the conservative nationalist leaders, led by Tunku Abdul Rahman, to negotiate a ceasefire. The talks arrived at a stalemate, the former's terms that the party be recognized as a legal political entity coming up against the latter's demand for an unconditional surrender. The cartoon segment includes a dramatized reading of the meeting's transcript, excerpting an exchange in which the CPM asserted that its armed resistance had contributed to several concessions by the British toward granting independence, a claim that was vehemently rejected by its interlocutors, ultimately bringing a halt to the talks.

Though the fighting continued, the talks nonetheless ensured the political dominance of the conservative National Front, which remains in power to this day.

The film's final sequences effectively cast the state's refusal to grant Chin Peng entry as a matter of history repeating itself, a replay of the 1955 exclusion of the CPM from national political life. This cyclical time is also visualized by the clock tower staff, whose work is marked by a repetitive motion and rhythm, as evidenced both in the physical efforts required to wind the clock and the routine maintenance scheduled throughout the year necessary to keep it running. The conjoining of cyclical time with the linear progressive time of the narrative of national development, the latter alluded to by the National Day celebrations, points to the assimilation of everyday time into nation time, hinting at the heterogeneous temporalities that constitute homogeneous, empty time. While the smooth running of the national festivities seemingly denotes a seamless integration of multiple temporalities into hegemonic nation time, the film's codification of the image of the clock tower workers as a visual metonym for Chin Peng's absence suggests otherwise. Just as Chin Peng is banished from the nation, so too the workers are hidden from sight. This reading could also be applied more broadly to the film's depictions of the nation's contemporary workforce, whose lives are synchronized with the rhythms of capitalism. With the exception of the final sequence, the segments featuring workers are located in small towns throughout the peninsula, thereby showcasing a less familiar picture of national development, which is often spatially coded contrastingly through images of a *kampung* or rural village and the modern big city, respectively signifying then and now. As the director himself notes, the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur have become a ubiquitous presence in mainstream Malaysian cinema, the once tallest buildings in the world an iconic landmark symbolizing the nation's economic progress (qtd. in Cazzaro 235). Thus, by focusing on working life outside of the nation's financial hub, the film examines the ubiquitous narrative of national development from a less familiar perspective of small town everyday life.

Appropriating the road movie as its template, the film uses Chin Peng's story as a point of departure rather than destination to facilitate multiple detours across the country. The documentary's road movie narrative structure is established by the opening shot of a car in motion, with the camera positioned close to the ground to present a close-up view of the tire's revolving motion as the straight highway recedes into the background. Reading motion as time, the scene's juxtaposition of cyclical and linear movement posits a dialectical relation of cyclical time of everyday life and linear historical time, the former's recursive looping compelling

the latter's forward movement. Constructed out of the emblems of modernity, the car and the highway, the opening scene also reads as an image of modern time consciousness in which the linear progression of homogeneous empty time becomes the hegemonic frame for organizing the experience of time, where "progress in space . . . coincides with the passage of time" (B. Lim 10).

On one level, the film inhabits the structure of linear time by using the biographical narrative of Chin Peng as its through-line, recounting his boyhood, his political awakening, his rise within the ranks of the Communist Party and his contributions to anti-colonial nationalist politics. However, the film unsettles this hegemonic time by approaching the everyday as a site for conjuring the past in the present. The film undertakes a journey through the various places he once passed through. At each stop along the journey, captions narrating Chin Peng's biography are superimposed on images of everyday scenes, as if to suggest that the past is inscribed in the present. For example, a caption informs viewers that an old row shop house, presently occupied by a lottery retail outlet, was once the family residence of Chin Peng, imbuing the otherwise unremarkable edifice with historical significance. The shot offers an image of a "thickened present," what Harootunian, citing Edmund Husserl, describes as "a present filled with traces of different moments and temporalities, weighted with sediments" (476). Interspersed between these captioned segments are interviews with local residents generally discussing their livelihoods. The interviews—to highlight a few: a bow tie-wearing roadside food vendor; a pomelo grower whose modest family business has expanded into a thriving export business; a lotus bun shop assistant with a mythical tale of his confection; and bean sellers known as "The Petai Boys" with their race-based marketing strategy—come across as ethnographic portraits that collectively showcase the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the nation.

"The idea," comments Amir Muhammad on his decision not to include archival shots of Chin Peng in the film, "was to show that history happens in the present tense" (qtd. in D. Lim). Focusing on the quotidian aspects of life, these interviews collectively construct the everyday as a site, a domain of experience for discerning temporal multiplicity that homogeneous, empty time sought to efface. In particular, these everyday scenes not only represent the present, but hold within it remnants of the past made legible as such by the biographical captions. Following the biographical detail that Chin Peng's family was in the bicycle business, the film transitions to an interview with Mr. Wong Kok Leong, a bicycle shop keeper. In addition to providing editing continuity, linking past and present, the bicycle is also coded as a fragment of the past in the present. While giving a tour of his shop,

Wong remarks that in an age where cars and motorcycles are the primary modes of transportation, bicycles have gone “out of fashion.” “As we progress, we leave the past behind,” he says, succinctly capturing the modernizing impulse of the age; yet his shop stands as a testament to the persistence of something belonging to a bygone era in the present. Yet, Wong does not come across as nostalgic or anachronistic, but is framed as a contemporaneous figure, signaling that the past is in the now.

In actively constructing the past in the present as figured in the everyday, these scenes refute the idea that history is the work of deriving knowledge from a fixed past or a means of making sense of the present through a linear narrative. Put differently, the film reads the everyday as if it were a translation of time if, following Benjamin, we take translation not to mean an act of assimilating a foreign language into a familiar tongue, but an act of transforming the familiar to convey that which is expressed in the foreign (“The Task of the Translator”). Consequently, to read in translation is to be attuned to the way in which a text is already composed by one that exists prior to it and to the fact that the text itself renders what the original could not express. Thus, to read in translation is to recognize that the text is not one, but is always already multiple and open to other readings, other re-articulations. Benjamin’s consideration of the original and translation on equal terms, countering the prevailing wisdom that privileges the original over the copy, is a reminder that the task of translation and, by extension, of reading, is a political act. Similarly, to think of historical knowledge production in terms of temporal translation is to consider the grounds of its construction. What counts as historical knowledge? What objects are privileged as having historical significance and what ignored?

In constructing everyday life as if it were a translation of time, the film stages the production of historical knowledge as the task of actualizing a past that has been forgotten yet remains unforgettable. By insisting that traces of the past are discernible in the present, the film refuses the idea that that which has been excised from history has been lost forever. Although absent from historical consciousness, these traces of the forgotten yet unforgettable are embedded in everyday, embodied practices. This is evident in the interview with Mr. Lee Eng Kew, a shop assistant at a confectionary renowned for its lotus flower buns. As Lee explains, the lotus flower bun was baked by a mother in memory of her son, a communist guerrilla fighter who never returned home from battle. The tale is a mix of myth and history, with talk of deities and dreams interwoven into a chronological account that spans the Japanese Occupation to the Malayan Emergency. It brings to mind Benjamin’s

remark: “It is more difficult to honor the memory of the anonymous than it is to honor the memory of the famous, the celebrated . . .” (*Selected Writings* 406). The mythical elements of the oral account of this anonymous fighter and his mother’s memory of him stand in contrast to Chin Peng’s biographical narrative, the latter’s textual form imbuing it with the gravitas of history denied to the former. That the memory of the anonymous fighter survives not only in Lee’s oral account but also in the everyday object of the lotus flower bun—a confection for which the town is famous and one that is sold throughout the country—calls into question the universality of history as a frame of knowledge of the past. It also highlights how the everyday object can be used to stage an encounter with the past in the present. Lee is himself a historian without any formal training, but his research has been recognized by academics and the public as a significant contribution to the history of Taiping, a major economic hub in the 19th century.⁶ Both his status as such and the account he presents for the film underscores the fact that subjugated knowledge is not just that which has been denied a place in official narratives on its own terms, as is the case with Chin Peng; it is also forms of knowledge whose very status as knowledge is subject to question.

Certainly, in recording these accounts, the film can be read as legitimizing these latter forms of subjugated knowledge. Recording a variety of perspectives—the interviews with, among them, the former guerrillas in southern Thailand, a survivor of Japanese Occupation atrocities, a retired English army captain, and a civilian recruited as a spy for the police—suggests that history is not just something that happened in the past, but an ongoing making that is actively contested. But there are also interview segments that index the active forgetting of a history that could have been, a historical amnesia that cultivates a tacit acceptance of the present as inevitable. This sentiment is expressed in an interview with Kaliasmah, a worker at the Elphil Plantation in Sungai Siput, the infamous site where the murder of three British planters by communist guerrillas took place, triggering the declaration of emergency rule. Whereas the manual labor of plantation work seems to have been passed down generationally, stories of the Emergency have not; asked if she knew of any stories about the Emergency related to her workplace, Kaliasmah suggested that that was before her time, though noting that her mother and grandparents might know.

As with the other small town locales in the film, it feels as if time in Sungai Siput moves more slowly given its relative lack of change, as opposed to the rapid

⁶ My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention, prompting further reflection on this aspect of the film.

pace of industrial development that the nation has experienced in the last few decades. The historic site has remained as it was decades earlier, still the Elphil Plantation albeit now Malaysian-owned. The framing of this site as a colonial inheritance, giving the lie to the notion that the transition from the colonial period to independence constituted a rupture in time and marked new beginnings from which the nation plots its ascendancy, is alluded to in the musical number that precedes this plantation segment. As with the other musical interludes in the film, all of which parody the patriotic and propaganda songs broadcast on state television, this particular number mimics a genre of propaganda songs that gives thanks to God for blessing the country; but, instead of God, the parody traces the origins of the nation's wealth and pride to colonial design. As the chorus goes:

When the world needs tins and tires,
 Malaya is willing to provide the raw materials.
 Mines and plantations were built by the colonialists,
 The people of Malaya are happy forever.

(Bila dunia memerlukan tin dan tayar,
 Malaya rela menyumbangkan bahan mentah
 Lombong dan ladang dibina oleh penjajah
 Rakyat Malaya bahagia selamanya.)

Pointing out that the narrative of national progress is also inextricably bound up with the history of global capital, the song thus weds the colonial past with national destiny. The song further spells out that the assimilation of the nation into the world standard time of capital ensures a bright future, a “happily ever after” that can be achieved through sheer hard work, as the first two lines of the song's final stanza suggest: “The fruit of Malayan labor (Hasil kerja warga Malaya) / We were once poor, now prosperous (Dulu miskin sekarang kaya).” Yet, as the interview with Kalliammah suggests, this future promise applies selectively, if at all, to the working class, their labor crucial to the country's wealth but their fair share of it denied.

In this regard, Elizabeth Freeman's concept of chrononormativity is useful in helping us understand how the idea of history as progress came to be lived so as to be taken as natural. Referring to the process through which bodies are “bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation,” the notion of chrononormativity engages with film's capacity as a biopolitical technology to

synchronize the temporal rhythms of individuals with nation time (3). Kalamah's description of her day best captures how nationalism and capitalism collude to regulate and structure the temporal rhythms of daily life via the domestic realm. As her remarks suggest, plantation work, though allowing for more flexibility than factory labor, segments the day in a clockwork manner just like the mechanized assembly line in an endless rotation: wake up, take the children to school, work, lunch, work, cook, clean, care for the children, sleep; thus, especially for the working class woman, domestic work begins when waged labor ends, and vice versa. The synchronization of everyday existence with the rhythms of capitalism penetrates into the domestic realm, which the patriarchal heteronormative state brackets off as a private domain, thus depriving women of equal access to national wealth to which they contribute. Hoping that her children will study hard so that they do not have to follow in her occupation, Kalamah further demonstrates that processes of chrononormativity regulate not only bodies but also capacities to dream. Yet, insofar as this internalized bourgeois fantasy remains for Kalamah, a representative figure of the gendered working class subject, as just that, fantasy, she thus appears as a queer figure within normative nation time, synchronized with its rhythms of industrial development, and yet is deprived of its gains, rendered out of sync so to speak. Nevertheless, even though she cannot cognitively recall the past, she serves as a living sign of the unfinished struggle for liberation.

The Last Communist's montage style makes visible the temporal rhythms of nation-capital time in everyday life in ways that capture and at the same time question the notion of history as progress. The arrangement of images with the corresponding text invites the viewer to deconstruct the national narrative. For instance, the rusted trespass sign in four languages not only evokes the wartime colonial Emergency era but also points to the ongoing war against the working class given that wealth is concentrated only in the hands of a few. Meanwhile, the shot of plantation workers spraying insecticide (while the captions show the declaration of the 1948 emergency) and the account of the ban of the CPM and of the arrest of leftist leaders together present a metaphorical image of the colonial powers intent on exterminating the leftist independence movement and ensuring the conservative elites' hegemonic position. Just as its amateur production style draws attention to the filmic apparatus itself, so too the film's montage style points to the constructed nature of history. But, more significantly, its incorporation of different time elements, the text coded as past and the image present, within the frame produces a temporality that unsettles normative nation-capital time.

At first glance, the press campaign against *The Last Communist* and the petition for its ban, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, can be read as a means of regulating the discourse of national identity and maintaining the hegemony of racial ideology. However, they are also attempts to avoid confronting a ghostly past even as they ironically reproduce the conditions for its haunting. *The Last Communist* is a film that stages such a reckoning not by seeing the history of the vanquished as a void to be retroactively filled, but by recognizing that fragments of the past persist in the present and are embedded within hegemonic forms of expression, awaiting activation. The provocation to action, implicit in its presentation of decolonization as a task yet to be completed, is that which renders history a political act of redefining the historical present.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. New York: Verso, 1991.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968. 69-82.
- . *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006.
- Cazzaro, Davide. "The Page and the (Video) Camera: Conversation with Amir Muhammad." *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews*. Ed. Tilman Baumgärtel. Singapore: NUS P, 2012. 227-44.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008.
- Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. "Filling in the Gaps of History: Independent Documentaries Re-Present the Malayan Left." *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*. Ed. Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010. 247-64.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010.
- Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

- Harootunian, Harry. "Remembering the Historical Present." *Critical Inquiry* 33.3 (2007): 471-94.
- I Love Malaya*. Dir. Chan Kah Mei, Christopher Len Ho Choon Hiong, Eunice Lau, and Wang Eng Eng. Objectif Films, 2006.
- Lelaki Komunis Terakhir (The Last Communist)*. Dir. Amir Muhammad. Perf. Toni Kassim and Janet Lee. Red Films, 2006.
- Lim, Bliss Cua. *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2009.
- Lim, Dennis. "Your Film Is Banned. There's Not Enough Violence." *New York Times* 9 July 2006. 9 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/09/movies/09lim.html>>.
- Williamson, Thomas. "Incorporating a Malaysian Nation." *Cultural Anthropology* 17.3 (2002): 401-30.
- Wong, Cindy Hing-Yuk. *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011.

About the Author

Fiona Lee is a Ph.D. candidate in English at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her dissertation examines literary and cinematic representations of the decolonization of Malay(si)a by way of considering the role of racialization in the production of narratives of nation and modernization. She is currently a Dissertation Fellow at The Graduate Center's Mellon Committee on Globalization and Social Change and an Instructional Technology Fellow at Macaulay Honors College, CUNY.

[Received 16 August 2012; accepted 20 December 2012]