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Corrupting the culture of denial?: A trans-ethnic cinematic representation and transformation of Malay/sian nationalism in independent film-making

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Abstract

The new millennium marks an epoch revival for Malaysia's film industry especially through independent film-making. *Sepet*, a small budget film won the Best Picture at the 18th Malaysian Film Festival in 2005 but was later condemned as the "corrupter" of Malay culture. The victory also sparked protests from local daily newspapers and generated debates at the public university and the House of Representatives regarding the merit of Malay/sian national cinema – a national cinema that was hailed as the cinema of denial. The love story between two teenagers from different social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds on the one hand demonstrates the contesting notion of ethnicity that further attested Malaysia's ethno-centric discourse of national identity. On the other hand, it accentuates a conflicting transition in Malaysian nationalism, particularly from the ethno-Malay nationalism toward an inclusive multi-ethnic Malaysian nationalism promoted by Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister. This paper offers insights into the dialectical tension between notions of Malay/sian nationhood consciously represented through cultural productions. For a multicultural Malaysia where nationalism is a mutable phenomenon through the manipulation of state/market-controlled mass media, does trans-ethnic independent film-making profess an alternative interval to the ethnic/patriotic nationalism through official multiculturalism?

Keywords: Nationalism, Cinema, Representation, Ethnicity, Multiculturalism

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Say of him what you like, but I know my child's failings. I do not love him because he is good, but because he is my child. How can you know how sweet he is, when all you do is measure the good and the bad? When I must punish him, he becomes even more a part of me. When I make him weep, I weep with him. I alone have a right to judge him, for only he who loves may chastise – (Rabindranath Tagore quoted from *Sepet*, Yasmin Ahmad, 2005)

Introduction

For many Asian post-colonial countries, cinema is a foreign import that was quickly indigenized into the form of “national arts”. As both cultural and social practices, the quest of what constitute a national cinema, to these countries, lies in the conjunction between cinema and nationhood (Dissanayake, 1994). In other words, cinematic representations reflect the style in which a community is being imagined (Anderson, 1991). *Sepet* and *Puteri Gunung Ledang (PGL)* were two films that attracted attention in Malaysia in 2005. The former is a small budget inter-ethnic romance set in the contemporary Malaysia and the latter is an epic that reaches back to the golden age of Melaka Sultanates (1414-1511) concerning a warrior and a princess. Both love stories, the two films narrate a very different concept of Malaysia, and thus project a very different version of Malaysia's nationhood. The narratives of these two films offer insights into the contesting notion between Malay and Malaysian nationalism informed by the construction and reconstruction of ethnicity that are consciously represented through cultural productions. This paper intends to examine the changing faces of nationalism in Malaysia manifested through the rivalry narratives between these two films.¹ In *PGL*, the pre-colonial Melaka Sultanate is constructed as homogenously Malay; the Malaysia projected in *Sepet*, on the other

hand, is multi-ethnic. The changes of nationalism in Malaysia are informed by and negotiated between the conflating nature between both the Malay and Malaysian nationalisms, a hybridity born out of necessity.

“Cinema of Denial”

At the 18th Malaysian Film Festival, *Sepet* was crowned as the Best Picture over *PGL*.² This victory sparked protests from local daily newspapers and generated debates at public universities as well as at the House of Representatives regarding the film’s merit as “national” cinema (Chok, Anis Ibrahim, Ng, & Ahmad, 2005) – a national cinema that Khoo (2006) argues as the “Cinema of Denial” (p. 83). To her, the “Cinema of Denial” is a product of government restrictions, film-makers’ self-censorship and the choice of audiences.³ In multi-ethnic Malaysia, the Malay cinema that generally comprises of an all-Malay casts, in Malay language, and focus on Malay social issues is frequently conflated with national and Malaysian cinema.⁴ While resisting Arabicization and asserting Malay indigenous identity informed most narratives of Malay cinema in the 1990s, Khoo’s (2006) maintains that in cinema the “multi” is being erased from Malaysian multiculturalism. On-screen projections of Malaysia, most of the time, are predominantly Malays and Malay culture. This mono-ethnic on-screen representation counter poses to the projection of *Bangsa Malaysia*, a United Malaysian nation informed by Mahathir’s Vision 2020.⁵

The turn of the new century has witnessed a shift toward a multi-ethnic representation of Malaysian society in film-making, particularly in independent films (Khoo, 2006).⁶ Literally meaning “slit” or “Chinese” eye, *Sepet* is another attempt by an independent filmmaker to locate inter-ethnic teen romance within the broader context of multi-ethnic Malaysia. In doing so, the film was further condemned as “*mencemar budaya*” (the corrupters or pollutants of Malay culture) (Mohd Arif Nizam Abdullah, 2006, p. 8; translation mine). Representing a multi-ethnic Malaysia with multiple languages instead of the mono-ethnic, mono-language, mono-culture as in the Cinema of Denial, *Sepet* does not fit the mode of “national” film. The “non-national” victory over *PGL* in 2005 therefore marked a milestone for independent film-making. At the same time, the win indicates a transition of nationalism since the new millennium. But what is independent film to Malaysia film industry in its infancy?⁷ And how does independent film-making foster a changing face of ethno-nationalism in Malaysia?

The “Arrival” of Independent Films in Malaysia

The definition of independent film, both in the West and Asia, is not static but in a constant evolution. For Hollywood, the year of 2003 marked the entering of independent films into the mainstream. With Oscar nominations for *Chicago* (Marchall, 2002), *Gangs of New York* (Scorsese, 2002) to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Zwick, 2002) and *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002), Hollywood has seen the evolution of independent films in term of style, genre, budget from production, distribution, and even consumption (Holmlund, 2005).

No longer define merely as low-budget, independent films have entered into the Hollywood mainstream in dual sense. For one, while critically recognized in movie awards, major studios in the United States have set up their own independent arms to produce, co-produce, or to invest in these “art” films. This indicates a greater dissemination and distribution of “indie” films within the USA and around the world. On the other end, while the perception of “indie” films continues to be associated with “social engagement and/or aesthetic experimentation – distinctive visual look, an unusual narrative pattern, a self-reflective style” (Holmlund, 2005, p. 2), – “indie” films in America since 2003 have acquired “cross-over potential” and/or have associated with “alternative point of view, whether they be expressed in experimental approaches or through crowd-pleasing comedy” (p. 2). In new packaging, more and more independent films have enjoyed profitable box office successes. These mainstream independent films, on the one hand, expanded the definition of “indie” films, and created a new category for “independent” film. In other words, once become and recognized as entering into the mainstream, today Hollywood independent film is in a relational term, or as Holmlund (2005) put it “a continuum, not an opposition” (p. 3).

In Malaysia, the definition of independent films is more simplistic. Malaysian independent films derived from presenting an alternative point of view to that of mainstream Malay-defined Cinema of Denial. Khoo (2006) argues that in Malaysia films are:

considered independent because the directors ignore the multiple barriers for inclusion in to Malay cinema, opting instead to be self-produced, self-funded, low-budget, avant-garde, or at least artistic film that may not be shown in local

cinemas (and they therefore need not undergo censorship from the national censorship board) (p. 123).

In other words, films are classified as independent according to the intention of the directors to present a narrative outside of Malaysian mainstream cinematic representation and narrative. The efforts of these directors were enabled by the advent of digital video technology. Since 2000, there are substantial booms in independent film-making in Malaysia and many of these independent films are shot in digital format (Khoo, 2006). These Malaysian independent films, although recognized overseas, share one commonality – they were rarely recognized on home soil as “national” cinema.⁸ For example, nine Malaysian films, all independent, from six different Malaysian directors of all ethnic backgrounds were featured in the 19th Tokyo International Film Festival under the “Winds of Asia” in 2006.⁹ Most of these films were not classified as national or acknowledged as Malaysian until January 2007.¹⁰

Sepet's success, therefore, indicates the recognition of independent film from within Malaysia for the first time.¹¹ The controversy generated by *Sepet*'s victory over *PGL* in 2005, therefore, can be read as the anxious transition from the “exclusive” ethno-Malay nationalism represented through the legendary tale of *PGL* to the “inclusive” multi-ethnic narrative in *Sepet*. A transition that closely echoes Mahathir's shifting rhetoric of a united Malaysian nation/race imagined through *Bangsa Malaysia* fifteen years ago (see Lee, 2004; Loh, 2002; Halim Salleh, 2000). Or, as Khoo describes (2006), independent film “introduces new terms to the field, thus making the Cinema of Denial “mainstream” Malay cinema and perhaps, reclaiming the pluralist,

hybrid, multi-ethnic national term “Malaysian cinema” for itself” (p. 123). *Sepet*’s triumph reflects not only artistic and narrative differences to the mainstream Cinema of Denial, but a multi-ethnic voice of cultural nationalism that is not officially originated, but a voice of nationalism from the periphery.

In this sense, I concur that *Sepet* “corrupted” Malay culture, the culture of denial in Malaysia’s mainstream public discourse. However, I will argue that it only corrupted the imaginary walls that were built by the Malay nationalists to encapsulate the core ethnic identifiers of “Malayness”—*bahasa, agama, raja* (language, religion, and royalty)—used to imagine the Malay as *Bangsa* (race/nation). To understand these claims, it is important to first understand the concept of Malaysia and its national identity through the constitution of the ethnic Malay and their three pillars of ethno-identifiers (Shamsul, 2004). These identifiers have evolved throughout the history of Malaysia and have informed the narrative of *PGL*. We can then comprehend the mainstream criticisms of the ways in which *Sepet* corrupts the Malay culture by simply representing an inter-ethnic relationship between a Chinese and a Malay.^{1 2} I will finish the paper with a look at the first scene of *Sepet* which evokes the complex notion of cultural hybridity. The scene demonstrates the ways in which Malaysian nationhood is constructed by the multi-ethnic society rather than any particular ethnic majority, like in Malaysia’s public discourses and also the narrative of *PGL*.

The Ethnically Constructed Nation and State

As a politically sovereign nation-state crafted by European colonialism, Malaysia is ethnically constructed (Cheah, 2005). The post-independent mainstream public discourse, social life, and ethnic groups in Malaysia are separated into communal blocks: namely the Malay, the Chinese, the Indian, and Others. Ethnically defined and divided since the period of British Colonization, these communal groups in Malaysia are kept by the nationalist government until today. The state, on the other hand, is run by the ethnic-based Barisan National (BN).^{1 3} Local mainstream mass media, aside from government direct and indirect regulation, are also compartmentalized into ethnic blocks either by station or time slot distributions (Khoo, 2006; more in Mustafa K. Anuar, 2002; Zaharom Nain, 2002; Zaharom Nain & Wang, 2004).^{1 4}

Ethnically divided, the post-independent federation of Malaysia is formulated around not only a core culture, but also a core ethnies – the Malay, who trace their ancestry back to the Melaka Sultanate (Devahuti, 1965; Reid, 2001; Khoo, 2006). Constructed as “race” under British Colonization – *Bangsa Melayu*, the core ethnies of Malay encompasses the notion of nation/people, race, ethnicity and this ethnies resides in Hang Tuah, the feudal warrior who later constructed as a national hero (Khoo, 2006; Tirtosudarmo, 2005). Although British-Malaya adopted the name Malaysia to construct a neutral sense for the new nation-state after independence (Milner, 1998), the conflating usage of the Malay to that of national intensified after the implementation of affirmative New Economy Policy (NEP) in favor of the ethnic Malay in the wake of communal riots in 1969.

Malay: Malaysia

But what constitutes the ethnic Malay? Loosely based, “Malay” is an ancient term that is referred to as a source of diverse modern identities for the former Malay Archipelago, the current day Southeast Asia (Reid, 2001). In the pre-colonial period, however, Malay referred to the coastal inhabitants of the Malay world rather than identifying any particular group of people (Reid, 2001). Local communities were generally associated with the locality of their inhabitants, like Jawa for example. In other words, even until today in Southeast Asia, “native” inhabitants do not all see themselves as Malay.¹⁵

Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of Malay identity after European colonization provides the region with genealogy and presumed descent ties among the diverse “ethnic” communities as argued in Smith (1991). It therefore informs the modern Malay, especially in Malaysia, of their “indigenusness” and thus provides them with the essence to imagine the political community (Smith, 1991). While these perceived sentiments and the senses of belonging are enhanced by the rise of capitalist print media (Anderson, 1991), Bhabha (1990) argues that a nation retains its essence through narrations in order to sustain the myths of origin through time. Therefore cinemas, “as the representation of social life rather than the discipline of social polity” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1-2), for a multicultural society not only provide constructive narratives into how a nation is imagined or narrated, but by whom (Khoo, 2006). In Malaysia, the Cinema of Denial enables the ethnic Malay to imagine their political community through a shared language, cultural heritages, and social history. The “national” format further normalizes the social

constructive nature of the ethnic Malay. In doing so, the Cinema of Denial also distinguishes the “national” to that of non-national local productions, either from other ethnic groups or alternative narratives. The rivalry between *PGL* and *Sepet* in 2005 thus opens up the space of contestation about that of “national” and attests Mahathir’s one *Bangsa Malaysia*’s rhetoric. As *PGL* tries to recollect the ethno-nationalist past, *Sepet* evokes the possible progressive future of Malaysia, a multi-ethnic future.

Bangsa Melayu: The Malay “Race”

While the modern Malay is constructed as a “racial” category through community migrations and colonial experiences, this concept does not apply uniformly across countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei (Reid, 2001; Tarling, 2001; Tirtosudarmo, 2005).¹⁶ In Indonesia, for instance, the dominant Javanese core culture faded into the political background in favor for Indonesia’s civic nationalism (Tirtosudarmo, 2005). Brunei constitutes another extreme in which indigenous groups like Kedayan, Bisavah, Dusun are legally incorporated into the social category of Malay (Reid, 2001).¹⁷ While the Malay in Malaysia is all Muslim, there is Christian Malay in Indonesia.

From the pre-colonial perspective, the early communities of the Malay world were influenced by Hinduism, Arabic and Chinese cultures and ethnic pluralism was a norm (Devahuti, 1965; Khoo, 2006; Lent & Colletta, 1977; Reid, 2001). The origin of the Malay, in Sumatra’s Bukit Siguntang, was believed to have a prominent Chinese presence that the mixed marriage between earlier Chinese traders and local females gave rise to the Chinese Peranakan

community (Mandal 2003; Shamsul, 2004; Tan 1988).¹⁸ This creolized Chinese Peranakan also known as *Baba-Nonya* communities were able to establish cultural practices based on the combination of local and Chinese cultural elements. In addition, they also constructed a “new” identity distinct from their cultural origins through forms of cuisine, costume, music and language (Mandal, 2003; Shamsul, 2004). We can therefore conclude that the origin of the peninsula/Melaka based Malay was a pluralistic society with a strong presence of Chinese in which cultural borrowing from and assimilation into the local culture and community was indeed a common practice.

What then makes an inter-ethnic relationship in *Sepet* unbearable to the critics? Based in Ipoh, the culturally and ethnically “separated worlds” of two teenagers collided at the market when Orked, a 16-year-old Malay girl who is a fan of Hong Kong films, especially those by “Taiwanese” actor Takashi Kaneshiro,¹⁹ went to the pirated video CD stall of the 19-year-old Jason, born to a Chinese father and a Peranakan mother (Begum, 2005; Goh, 2005). Jason fell in love with Orked instantly. Although their teen romance eventually met with a tragic yet ambiguous end, their friendship which turns into a relationship provoked landside criticisms and prompted a local journalist to ask “Orked sebagai perempuan Melayu digambarkan mempunyai didikan agama yang teguh tetapi dia hanya sesuai untuk seorang lelaki cina penjual CD dan VCD haram yang boleh dikategorikan sebagai penjenayah” (how could Orked, a Malay girl who has firm religious education, be only good enough for a Chinese pirated CD and VCD seller that can also be categorized as an infidel) (Mohd Arif Nizam Abdullah, 2006, p. 8 –

translation mine)? My question however is, why not? To further understand this in Malaysian context, the construction of the ethno-Malay from the rhetoric of Hang Tuah, a national myth that underscores Malay popular consciousness need to be re-examined (Khoo, 2006).

PGL: From ‘Race’ to nation?

Told in many contemporary Malay cultural texts including *PGL*, the story of Hang Tuah is about loyalty. The narrative is relatively simple but the rhetoric that the story embodies is rather complex. As *Laksamana* (admiral) of Sultan Mansur Shah (of Sultan Mahmud Shah in *PGL*),²⁰ Hang Tuah and his four childhood friends served the feudal king. However, the Sultan’s unjust order for Tuah’s execution triggered the anger from Hang Jebat, one of Tuah’s childhood friends, to rebel against the ruler. When the Sultan discovered Tuah was alive, he sent order for Tuah to kill Jebat, the traitor (Khoo, 2006). The Tuah-Jebat battle that accentuated the debate of loyalty to the state (*setiawan* – most loyal) as represented by Hang Tuah and to friendship (*setiakawan*) as represented by Hang Jebat captures the essence of the modern Malay dilemma—a dialectic tension between Tuah-Jebat loyalty, *Adat* (Malay custom) and Islam, traditional and modernity—that was also resurfaced in Malaysia’s real politics during the Anwar Saga, the Mahathir-Anwar Ibrahim power showdown in 1998 (Khoo, 2006).²¹ In many ways, the display of loyalty between Tuah and Jebat consist the real Malay dilemma, on one hand, the shift of loyalty from the royalty toward the state and also the anxious transition toward modernity (see Milner, 1998; Ang, 2001a).

Guarded by the elite Malay nationalists, the modern ethno-Malay identity entrusted in Hang Tuah is directly facilitated to the three pillars of *bahasa, agama, raja* (language, religion, and royalty) (Heng, 1998; Shamsul, 2004). In the post-independent Malaysia, Malay is “a ‘person who professes the Muslim religion, habitually speaks Malay, conforms to Malay custom,’ and either was born in Malaya or Singapore before independence or is the child of someone born there at that time” (Milner, 1998, p. 162). This identification was also used to narrow down the once “fluid” connotations of the peninsula Malay while cutting ties with their Indonesian counterparts during Konfrantasi, the period where Sukarno’s regime opposed and sabotaged to the formation of Malaysia (Means, 1976; Tirtosudarmo, 2005). In one stroke, the elite Malays in Malaysia stressed the Malayness to the Malay Peninsula and celebrated the peninsular polities of Melaka Sultanate (Milner, 1998).

Constructed in the 1950s, these ethno-identifiers are by no means static and uncontested. For instance, as the English language resurrected in the 1990s as an important medium for commerce, higher education, and even as a symbol of upward social progression among Malaysians (Halim Salleh, 2000; Lee, 2004), the power of the Malay monarchy has been subsequently slashed by the Mahathir’s government since the 1980s (Khoo, 2006). Furthermore, the search for international Malay to establish the new global Malay Diaspora was in place in the mid 1990s. It is the nationalist apparatus mainly to push the peninsula/Melaka based Malay into the field of global economy (Watson, 1996). Based on the Chinese Diasporic model, histories were reinterpreted and the worldwide Malay communities were traced to South Africa

and Latin America in which Islam remains their sense of Malay identity even though they have since lost their knowledge of the Malay language (Watson, 1996). While Watson (1996) expresses his concern of further ethnic divisions in Malaysia, the reconstructing of the new global Malay contradicted to the notion of *Bangsa Malaysia* (Khoo, 2006). Like ethnicity, the unproblematic language of diaspora, as foreground in Ang (2001b), is indeed a nationalist project.

On the contrary, with their dual roles as nationalists/academics, Halim Salleh (2000) and Shamsul (1997; 1998; 2004) only recognize of the socially “constructed” ethno-Malay but fail to characterize Malay identity in the reconstructing mode as in Reid (2001), Tirtosudarmo (2005), and Watson (1996).^{2 2} Their failure is not recognizing the instability of “race” in which Mandal (2003) writes that “ethnic identity at any given moment may be likened to a still frame of a film that captures a momentary image in a larger story” (p. 53). Therefore even with the ethno-identifiers of Malayness, the two Malaysian scholars also fall prey to what Nair (1998) charges as merely engaging with the isolated Malay politics rather than whole Malaysian society.

Shamsul (2004) and Halim Salleh (2000) rejection of any possibility of cultural flow, borrowing, or hybrid, if not trans-ethnic solidarities, in Malaysia mirrored the suppressions of Malaysia’s official history recollections done coincidentally by the state for structural and ideological means (Mandal, 2003). On another level, they fail to address ethnicity in relational terms, as Mandal (2003) rightly writes, for example, that “the rise of the Malay nationalism

could be more intimately and substantially linked to the fear of the “Chinese,” especially as an encroaching economic power” (p. 57). Therefore, even if Shamsul’s (2004) inward-looking three pillars of ethno-identifiers are to define Malayness, only a partial of Malayness is identified. The national glory and ethnic pride in *PGL* is only partially Malaysia. Furthermore ignoring the Malayness is better defined by the non-Malay, Shamsul’s reductive thesis, just like Mahathir’s Malay Dilemma (1970), runs into common mistake by state-managed multiculturalism that is only “addressing ethnic and racial difference as a question of ‘identity’ rather than of history and politics...,” (Bennett, 1998, p. 4). In Malaysian context, Joseph (2006) writes:

The politics of ethnic identification in Malaysia is entwined with the politics of difference...difference here is not attributed just to diversity, but also to differences that are embodied within webs of power...the state-imposed ethnic labeling of Malay, Chinese, Indian and other and the political categories of Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera constitute the official discourse of ethnicity in Malaysia (p. 71).

As the discourses of multiculturalism are by no means suggesting an equal scholarship among existing “cultures” within a national boundary, but to further disguise the power structures between the “host” and the peripheral immigrant cultures whether in the United States, Canada or Australia (Bannerji, 2000; Harindranath, 2006; Watson, 2000), recognizing multiculturalism in Malaysia pave the way for the putative construction of the Malay “host” culture and identity while the UMNO-lead nationalists legitimized its’ authoritative rule and continue to reinvent themselves as the guardian of ethno-Malay identity.

In *PGL*, however, Tuah's loyalty was told through the legend of a mysterious princess, Gusti Putri Retno Dumillah. Profoundly in love with Tuah, the princess of Majapahit traveled across the Straits of Melaka to *Gunung Ledang* (Mount Ledang) in wish to be reunited with Tuah. When the Majapahit Kingdom is threatened by *Putera Demak* from Jawa, Raja Majapahit pledged allegiance to the Sultan Melaka by offering Gusti Putri's hand in marriage with the Sultan. However, when the princess rejected the marriage proposal to the Sultan and accepted instead to marry *Putera Demak*, Hang Tuah is sent to lead the Sultan's royal delegation and to propose to the princess.

Tuah's second episode of loyalty to the Sultan demonstrated the male-to-male relationship put forward by Eva Sedgwick where women are used as symbolic exchange to strengthen the male homosocial bond (Khoo, 2006). Just like many nationalist discourses where the roles of women are to facilitate the masculine battle of national sovereignty and ethnic pride, *PGL* can be read as the latest attempt to recollect the ethno-Malay identity with the fusion of history, mythology and fiction against the insurgency of Islam since the 1990s (Khoo, 2006). Through the eyes of the mysterious princess, the rhetoric of Hang Tuah in *PGL* was to recuperate the symbol of male Malayness – the same Malayness that would be diluted if Orked was to marry Jason in *Sepet*. Their inter-marriage, if they do, would hinder the transformation of the "pure" Malay "race" to the Malay nation.

Question arises as to just how does this inward-looking ethno-Malay identity reconfigured in *PGL* facilitates the bases for the national culture and identity of a multicultural

Malaysia? If the Malay culture is what the national culture is supposed to be based upon, then the Malay-defined Malaysian culture is indeed a Culture of Denial (Khoo, 2006, also see Khattab, 2004; Ramasamy, 2004). What then makes Orked more Malay than Jason, whose mother is a Chinese-Malay Creole *Nonya*? Does losing Islam as religion erase one's Malayness? If so, how do we explain Malayness when Islam knows no national and ethnic boundaries (Martinez, 2001; Watson, 1996)? Losing Islam, one should have gained his/her ethnicity. Furthermore, do these Malay nationalists and scholars disassociate the Chinese from Islam? If then, how do we explain the Muslim Chinese, known as Hui Chinese in mainland China (Gladney, 1998a)? Are these nationalists and scholars inline with Huntington's notion of clash between civilizations (Ang, 2001a; also see Huntington, 1996; Gladney, 1998a)?^{2 3} What of Malayness is being corrupted by *Sepet* if not the ethno-Malay identifiers? These questions can be answered by the close analysis of *Sepet*.

Sepet: Hybrid Culture of the Future Bangsa Malaysia?

Contrasting *PGL* and other Malay films, *Sepet* presented an interesting form of narrative. On the exterior, the narrative showcases many facets of Malaysian social life with a relatively simple story line, a teen romance. To some, the essence of the story lies in the simple narrative that captures the tension of the complexities and contradiction of ethnicities by deliberately ignoring ethnic divisions, class consciousness, and religious differences. Jason and Orked represented these opposite ends: Chinese/Malay, lower class/middle class,

non-Muslim/Muslim. It therefore brings out anxieties in those who like or even dislike the film. The three-minute opening scene of *Sepet*, I contend, paradoxically demonstrated the complexity and absurdity of ethnicity in Malaysia. Using hybridity to challenge the invisible ethnic line imposed by the state, the scene brings out the anxiety in the ethnic compartmented multi-ethnic Malaysia especially in the post-Asian century discourse.

The anxiety here is twofold. On the one hand, the unease lies in the attempt to normalize the transition of the colonial/nationalist constructed Malay “race” into the Malay nation resides in the notion of gender. As a Malay girl, Orked embodies the symbol of culture through her reproductive nature. In short, in order to normalize the common pure Malay roots, women are to be protected and policed against “invasion”. As in one of the charges toward *Sepet*, Orked is identified as not only Malay but a girl, who has firm religious education. The ethnic, gender and then religious arrangement echoes to Milner’s (1998) observation that “the Islamic critique of *bangsa*, and of the concept of nationalism... maybe partly understood... in terms of a strengthening of Malay ethnicity” (p. 176). Central to all these is the notion of gender, which does not cut across ethnicity in Malaysia’s public and official discourse. Simply put, to construct the “pure” Malay nation Orked is to marry a Malay man.

On the other hand, while attempting to inverse the stereotype imposes upon ethnic communities by examining between the myths and realities about ethnicity (Gatsiounis, 2005; Wong, 2005), *Sepet* also stumbles into the border zone of hybridizations between the constructed ethno-Malay and the “ambiguous and uncertain boundary between the “Chinese”

and “non-Chinese” (Ang, 2001b, p. 86). The latter is personified by Jason. The border zone, as Ang (2001b) writes in *problematizing Chinese Diasporas*, is “where identities are unfixed and destabilized” and the “processes of hybridization transpire on a regular and ordinary basis (p. 87). Jason’s diasporic Chinese identity has placed him away from the “pure” Chinese core and resided him in the “danger zone” in which his Chinese characteristics are at risk. As if without much effort, Jason could be assimilated into the local culture and thus loses his Chineseness.

Therefore in the complex inner layer, *Sepet* puts forward the notion of hybridity, “the necessity of hybridity” (Ang, 2001b, p. 70). Applying equally to the Malaysian context, as she rightly argues, that “hybridity is not only crucial for the conduct of ordinary everyday life in situations of complicated entanglement, it is also widely practiced by the people/masses – against the grain of imposed fixed identities” (p. 73-74). While multiculturalism implicitly maintains cultural boundary, hybridity implies a blurring sense of boundaries and thus “alerts us to the incommensurability of differences” (Ang, 2001b, p. 17).

In the opening scene, we first heard Jason’s voice reading a poem to his mother in Mandarin Chinese. As the camera slowly moves toward the left, we are introduced to Jason and his mother in a casual afternoon conversation. Impressed by the writing, the mother is later told that the poem is indeed a translated version of Rabindranath Tagore’s poem. It is written by an Indian instead of a mainland Chinese. She sighs and says “strange, a different culture, a different language and yet we can feel what was in his heart” (quoted from *Sepet*, Yasmin Ahmad, 2005).

Jason nods and agrees. In this simple screen setting, the notion of hybridity is narrated in a few ways and in multiple layers of the film text throughout the whole movie.

First of all, the mother-son conversation is effortlessly done in switching Peranakan Malay, Mandarin Chinese, and Cantonese. While reciting the poem in Mandarin Chinese, Jason speaks to his mother in Cantonese but she responds in Peranakan Malay. The mother's Creole cultural background is accentuated not only in the language she uses, but also marks by her appearance and the Nyonya kebaya she wears. Her spoken language, Nyonya kebaya, and hair style place her in between the two seemingly mutually exclusive "Malaysian" cultures: Chinese and Malay. While representing a hybrid symbol between the Malay and Chinese, she casually makes a comparison between Rabindranath to Amitabh Bachchan, a Bollywood actor. The simple comparison shows her awareness of other ethnic communities, in this case the Indian, in Malaysia. Moreover, by favoring Rabindranath's hair style over Jason's bleached golden brown hair-do, she sees no ethnic boundary set by stereotypical in the curly versus straight hair style between the "Indian" Rabindranath and her son Jason.

This awareness of cultural influx, influences, and hybridity were not limited to the Chinese household. Orked's mother and Kak Yam, the house-help, for example are both Chinese soap opera followers and belt out a Cantonese song together in one scene. Moreover, Thai music is also a favorite among them. These subtexts demonstrate the awareness of cultural flows in Malaysian daily life. In this regard, it mirrors to what contested by Ang (2001b) that "a formidable hybrid construction" (p. 72) in which only through hybridity that ethnic minority

“can stake a claim on the validity and, yes, ‘authenticity’” (p. 73) of nationhood shunned away from them while in the periphery position. To her, while writing for the Indonesian Chinese, this form of hybridity is a necessity and a “life-sustaining tactic of everyday survival and practice in a world overwhelmingly dominated by large-scale historical forces whose effects are beyond the control of those affected by them” (p. 73). Her claim is echoed by Tan’s (1984) observation of the culturally diverse Chinese communities in Malaysia where “their life-world (world of daily life) is not merely a Chinese social world, it is a multi-ethnic social world” (cited in Mandal, 2003, p. 58). Further exemplified in the opening scene, the socio-cultural landscape of Malaysia that *Sepet* presented in the narrative is a hybrid and thus goes beyond multiculturalism, who framed culture as mutually exclusive. Comparing to *PGL’s* homogeneous Melaka, *Sepet* acknowledges the influences of regional cultural flows that inform the construction of Malaysians and thus national culture and identity. It therefore demonstrates the ways in which ethnic identity of the multi-ethnic Malaysia is mutually constituted and negotiated, the same feature that was missing in the Cinema of Denial and public discussion as well as media discourses in contemporary Malaysia.

Secondly, resides in the border zone Jason embodies dual sense of hybridity. The first is “possibly” biological but definitely sociological. Alternatively, his hybridity is political. Both senses, however, are equally problematic and need to be unpacked. As the son of a Peranakan mother, Jason’s “ethnicity” is Creole and thus ambiguous. If the Chinese Peranakan, like defined in Shamsul (2004), was indeed the product of inter-marriages between Chinese traders

and local females “and became assimilated into the local community,” Jason’s ethnicity, “biologically” if as such, is not distinct from Orked’s Malayness. Taken from his mother, Jason would have inherited one quarter of “Malay”. On the other hand, if Jason’s mother is from “pure” Chinese ancestry but later adapted into local Malay customs, what make her less Malay than the nationalist definition of Malayness in the post-independent Malaysia when the “local communities” are identified as born native? In this regards, does “Chinese” blood diluted the indigenous native? On the other hand, as losing the Malay language does not erase Malayness from the South African and Latin American Malay in the global Malay Diasporic model, Jason and, especially, his mother do speak Malay. Furthermore, none of Malaysian Prime Ministers are “pure” Malay but of Arab, Turkish, Indian and Thai ancestry (Mandal, 2003).

This brings us to the last possibility and seemingly unproblematized yet problematic second and political notion of Jason’s hybridity, a necessity negotiated through/with Chinese Diaspora. Taken from the paternal side and imagined as part of the global Chinese Diaspora, Jason’s Chinese Malaysian identity is less than clear cut. According to the symbolic representation of varieties of Chinese, he is at the border zone, away from the “pure” Chinese core (Ang, 2001b; see Pan, 1998). If the father is classified as overseas Chinese, the Malaysian-born multi-dialect Jason situated in between the so-called overseas Chinese and those who assimilated. As noted earlier, this danger zone is the boundary set between the Chinese and non-Chinese, like that of Malayness. Away from the “pure” Chinese central core of China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, Jason’s live-world, in the multi-ethnic Malaysia, situates him

very close to the “ambiguous and uncertain boundary between the “Chinese” and “non-Chinese” (Ang, 2001b, p. 86) just like the Chinese Indonesian in Indonesia. That is Jason can be assimilated into the Malay by acquiring three-pillars of Malayness, which is, as I have argued in the earlier section, historically and socio-culturally possible.

The anxiety toward Jason’s “ethnic” ambiguity is further accentuated in one scene where Jason dances to a traditional Malay music in front of his “Chinese” friends that a critic cries “I found the easy acceptance of Jason’s dancing by his mates incongruous, as one would expect people from the VCD peddling/gangster sub-culture to have teased him” (Fathima Idris, 2005, p. 21). It is not sure whether Jason’s “out-of-place-ness,” to Fathima Idris, is fostered by his ethnicity (Chinese) and social class (gangster), or by Fathima Idris’s “expectation” imposed on ethnicity. In suspicion she writes:

I suspect the characters of Jason (the hero) and his friend Ah Keong are composite characters and cannot be found here in Malaysia; not merely because that they do not speak Manglish, but also because it is hard to place them in any identifiable strata of society. Jason reads poetry in Mandarin and I assumed that he must have attended a vernacular school since one would rarely find a Chinese boy from a national-type school reading Mandarin. Further, the generally held perception is that those who go to vernacular schools or single-race schools are insular people” (p. 21).

Fathima Idris’s suspicion, assumption, perception, and generalization on what Chinese Malaysian should be are not very far from the essentialized nationalists. The link Fathima Idris is drawing here is problematic. To her, Manglish (Malaysian-style English or broken English) is equating to Chinese Malaysian and when losing it, Jason and Ah Keong lost their “identifiable”

social strata. If not of racism, one can sense the social Darwinism in her claim that speaking good English and Chinese ethnicity are mutually exclusive. Linking Mandarin poetry, vernacular school, and insular people, her assumption on one China, either territorial or cultural, thus unify global Chinese, may I suggest, is stronger than that of overseas Chinese Diaspora communities feel globally (see Ang, 2001b). Her casual association of Jason with “the VCD pedding/gangster sub-culture” brings to mind the earlier criticism that places “a Chinese pirated CD and VCD seller” to that of “infidel”. Without noticing the question of class, these criticisms stop at the doorstep of ethnicity. It is then unknown whether Jason’s infidelity is due to his Chinese ethnicity or his social class? In line with the nationalist discourse and policies, these criticisms reveal the psyche in Malaysia’s politics of ethnicism, in which Chinese are rich and the Malay is poor, a malicious perception that haunted Chinese communities across Southeast Asia (Ang, 2001b). If admitting the reverse conceptualization of ethnic communities and class formations in Malaysia, Fathima Idris is admitting to the contrary of the nationalists’ affirmative action in justifying of New Economy Policy (NEP). Jason’s ambiguity and uncertainty equally alarm the “pure” Malay nationalists and those who rally for the discourse of ethnic diasporic model.

Lastly, the hybridization suggested in *Sepet* goes beyond the state boundaries of Malaysia and even that of the Chinese Diaspora to “Asia”. The Pan-Asian identity is exemplified in Takeshi Kaneshiro, Orked’s favorite actor. When the scene cuts to the Quran reading Orked after introducing Jason, inside Orked’s wardrobe doors, we are introduced to her

favorite actor, a Japanese-Chinese hybrid “Taiwanese” singer turned actor who become famous in Hong Kong Cinema. On those posters, Takeshi is identified as “Asian”. “Asianness” was celebrated at the height of economic success and countries like Malaysia and Singapore spoke proudly of “Asian Values” (Khoo, 2002; Kymlicka & He, 2005).

In countering the West, the Asian Century or the Asian Renaissance fostered by the “dragons” and “tigers” economy of East and Southeast in the 1990s (see, Anwar Ibrahim, 1996) reflected the nation-states apparatus to “reinstale a (cultural) border on a much more grandiose ‘civilization’ scale” (Ang, 2001a, p. 41). Describing Takeshi, Drake (2003) writes that “in life and on film, Kaneshiro has proven impossible to typecast” (p. 1). She further contends that “the son of a Japanese businessman and a Taiwanese homemaker, he grew up in Taipei straddling between two cultures”. To this, Tu, a movie director she interviewed, adds that Takeshi “doesn’t belong to Hong Kong, Taiwan or anywhere” (Drake, 2003, p. 1). In this regard, the form of hybridity Takeshi constitutes is not merely within a national border but is of transnational Asia. Though Takeshi’s initial hybridity derives from his mixed nationality, socially but more so professionally, his hybridity originated from the “ambiguity and uncertainty” or as the journalist put it “rootlessness” and thus “Pan-Asian”. To Ang (2001a), however, the unitary imagined generic Asia is a sign of postmodern anxiety nurtured by the increasing vulnerability of nation borders. Deconstructing Diaspora, she further writes that “hybridization consists of exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements, it necessarily implies a softening of the boundaries

between 'people': the encounters between them are as constitutive of who they are as the proceedings *within* (Ang, 2001b, p. 87).

In this regard, Takeshi's hybrid "ethnicity" is open for negotiation according to different nation-states. While "rootless", simultaneously he belongs to Taiwan (socially), Japan (nationally), Hong Kong (professionally), physical and cultural China ("culturally"), and overseas Chinese (diasporically?). His in-between position opens up another interesting psyche of Malaysia – the nationalist imagined East embodied by Japan's economy in Mahathir's Look East Policy.²⁴ Instead of "straddling between two cultures" as suggested, Takeshi gives a blurring sense of reference to China/Chinese. While holding on to the diasporic model, if the Malay nationalist-defined Chinese immigrants are from mainland China, the hubs of Chinese in the era of globalization are no longer limited to China, but Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and elsewhere. In Takeshi's case, will Japan, the Mahathir's imagined east, constitute another hub for Chinese? Furthermore, as China has become a major player in the global economy, it is relatively unknown whether would the "look East" in today Malaysia be meant to look toward China? Even if *Sepet* screams slit eyes, what at stake here is the fragmentation of Chinese in Malaysia and else where. The eye aperture might no longer refers to the local Chinese Malaysians but the pan-Asia that, in the aftermath of Asian Financial crisis, led by China's economic growth.

Conclusion

Sepet narrates a vision of Malaysia that is missing from the mainstream media and public discourse in Malaysia. The opening quote from Tagore illustrated the complexity and ambivalent relationship between two entities, be that between self and nation or self versus others. The notion of Malaysia is entangled within the complex and ambivalent webs of ethnicity, nationalism, histories, and politics. Demonstrating awareness in trans-ethnic and inter-ethnic cultural flows in the daily life of all Malaysians in stead of a mono-ethnic Malaysian society, *Sepet* presented an inclusive Malaysian society of all ethnic community and exemplified the experience of hybridity in Malaysians daily social life.

Individually or collectively, ethnic, class, gender, religion identity in contemporary Malaysia are negotiated on a daily bases, a practice of hybridity that Ang (2001b) put as “necessity”, not luxury. To her, hybrid construction is the ways in which those in the peripheral to negotiate their position from marginalization. The position of marginalization here, I contend, simultaneously refers to the discourse of ethnic minorities and the narrative of alternative point of views of independent films against the denial of mainstream “national” culture. The revival of internationally and nationally recognized independent film-making therefore signals a change in nationalism in Malaysia. Representing a discourse absence from the Cinema of Denial, *Sepet*'s recognitions, either overseas and in Malaysia indicated a momentarily shifted in narrating Malaysian nationhood, and thus nationalism. The relationship between ethnic communities is an ongoing negotiation, tolerance in cultivating the common future of Malaysia.

As a contemporary cultural text, *Sepet* attests the notion of ethnicity beyond boundaries set by the chauvinist elites who intend to sterilize “race” to unchanging characteristics. If Malaysia is to be defined merely by the Malay, *Sepet* indeed is not a “national” film among cinemas of denial. *PGL* on the other hand would be a better fit. Conversely if national culture and identity are to incorporate the multi-ethnics social fabric of the multicultural Malaysia, it takes a true Malaysian to wholly understand *Sepet*, represented through the context instead of the storyline.

Nationalism in Malaysia is a mutable phenomenon. While in the 1990s, the nation-state was overwhelmed by Mahathir’s Vision 2020 rhetoric and looked toward his vision to create *Bangsa Malaysia*, the turn of the new century witness a change. The projection of nation through cultural nationalism is not initiated by the state but from the peripheral. As in the American context, independent film in this century is “a continuum, not an opposition” (Holmlund, 2005, p. 3), *Sepet-PGL* rivalry constituted an interesting contestation in projecting Malaysia. It is then a relatively open feature as to how Malaysian film industry evolves through time. In 2006, *Gubra*, the semi-sequel of *Sepet*, took home the Best Picture at the 19th Malaysian Film Festival. Shaken up by the *Sepet-PGL* rivalry in 2005, Malaysia is also witnessing a proliferation of interests and varieties in film production (Faridul Anwar Farinordin, 2005, December 31). The 19th Malaysian Film Festival also opened the door to non-Malay films. On January 16, 2007 FINAS also embraced seven Malaysian films that have won international awards in 2006. Among them are *Love Conquers All* by Tan Chui Mui, *Rain Dogs* by Ho Yuhang, *Company of Mushrooms* by Tan Chui Mui, *Tuesday Be My Friend* by Chris Wong,

and *Adults Only* by Joon Han, which are all in Chinese, shot in Malaysia with Malaysian talents (Amir Mohammad, 2007b). Amir Mohammad's *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (How Are You the People from the Village?) will be featured in Berlin Film Festival (Amir Mohammad, 2007a). Independent films in Malaysia thus continue to provide narratives absent from the Cinema of Denial. Concluding with Rabindranath Tagore's "it is as near to you as your life, but you can never wholly know it" (quoted from the *Sepet*), the narrative advocates that *Bangsa Malaysia*, the Malaysian Nation/Race, that country sets out to materialize by the year of 2020 is at present rather than in the prefixed future.

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Notes

¹ In Malaysian context, there is the Malay ethno-nationalism and the multi-ethnic Malaysian nationalism. I use nationalism in Malaysia to refer to the combination of these two nationalisms.

² *Sepet* won six awards at the 18th Malaysian Film Festival including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress, Most Promising Actor, Most Promising Actress, and Best Original Story (Begum, 2005). The film that had won the Ninth Malaysian Video Award, the 27th Creteil International Women Directors Festival in France, the Golden Chinese Arts Awards and the Anugerah Era 2005 also went on to win the Best Asian Film Award in the Winds of Asia section of the 18th Tokyo International Film Festival (Koay, 2005).

³ Issues deemed sensitive to national unity are restricted by Malaysian government, either from the form of censorship whereby the suppressive state measures such as the Internal Security Act or through the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). Established in 1981 to nurture, promote, and facilitate Malaysian film industry, FINAS was placed under the Ministry of Information in 1986 (more in Khoo 2006).

⁴ Production wise, however, some Malay movies are made by multi-ethnic crews. *PGL*, for example, is directed by Teong Hin Saw, a Chinese director. Even so, Malaysian (or Malay) film industry is said to have been “founded on Chinese money, Indian imagination, and Malay labour” (see van Der Heide, 2002, p. 105).

⁵ Enunciated by Mahathir Mohamed in 1991, the rhetoric of Vision 2020 has nine challenges (see Zaharom Nain, 2004). One of the nine challenges is to create one *Bangsa Malaysia*, a united Malaysian nation, by the year of 2020 (Khoo, 2003; Loh, 2002). To Mahathir, *Bangsa Malaysia* is the answer to ease ethnic tensions in Malaysia in which: *Bangsa Malaysia* means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal of *Bangsa Malaysia*, the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion (The Star, 11 Sept. 1995 cited in Loh, 2002). The rhetoric encourages all citizens to imagine themselves as a political community during Asian economic height prior to the Asian Financial Crisis.

⁶ Examples are Amir Mohammad's *Lips to Lips* (2000), James Lee's *Snipers* (2001) and *Ah Beng Returns* (2001), Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2001).

⁷ In 1908, the first cinema in Malaya was opened in Singapore by an Englishman. Rooted in Malay theatre, the Malay film industry was influenced by Persian plays, Indian cinema and mythology. While on the other hand, the first Malay film production company in Malaya was set up by the Shaw Brothers in

Singapore. Production and operation wise, it was comprised of Chinese capital, Indian and Filipino directors, cinematographer, editors, scriptwriters, and Malay actors (Khoo, 2006).

⁸ Under the Malaysian National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) Act 1981 and the National Film Policy 1997, films that are made locally in Malaysia are deemed not national without 70 percent in Malay language. For non-national local Malaysian film, they do not get the 25% tax exemption that those national films.

⁹ The “Wind of Asia” at the 19th Tokyo International Film Festival featured Yasmin Ahmad’s *Rabun, Sepet, Gubra*, and *Mukhsin*; Ho Yuhang’s *Rain Dogs*; Khoo Eng Yow’s *The Bird House*; Tan Chui Mui’s *Love Conquers All*; Bernard Chauly’s *Goodbye Boys*; and James Lee’s *Before We Fall In Love Again*.

¹⁰ On January 16, 2007, the National Film Development Agency (FINAS) acknowledged Malaysian films that have won international awards in 2006. Among the seven films are *Love Conquers All* by Tan Chui Mui, *Rain Dogs* by Ho Yuhang, *Company of Mushrooms* by Tan Chui Mui, *Tuesday Be My Friend* by Chris Wong, and *Adults Only* by Joon Han, which are all in Chinese, shot in Malaysia with Malaysian talents (Amir Mohammad, 2007). *Rain Dogs* and *Love Conquers All* were invited to the 19th Tokyo International Film Festival and were featured under “Winds of Asia” with nine other Malaysian films, including *Sepet*.

¹¹ The 18th Malaysian Film Festival in 2005, after transferring from digital format to 35mm for general release, *Sepet* made the cut and was allowed entry to the competition. While many independent films, including James Lee’s *Beautiful Washing Machine*, Ho Yuhang’s *Min*, Sandosh Kesavan’s *Aandal*, Deepak Kumran’s *Chemman Chaalia*, Linda Tan’s *Visits*, Amir Mohammad’s *The Big Durian*, Ng Tia Hann’s *First Take Final Cut*, and Woo Ming Jin’s *Monday Morning Glory*, were not allowed to compete because of their digital formats and most of them not in the Malay language, except for *Monday Morning Glory* (Anwardi Datuk Jamil, 2005). *Sepet* this became the only independent to make the cut in 2005. Though if we want to argue the entry and victory might have make *Sepet* non-independent, at the point of entry, *Sepet* is till, as I consider, as an independent film.

¹² *Sepet* is not the first inter-ethnic romance feature on film. In 1955, *Selamat Tinggal Kekasihku* (Farewell My Love) featured an inter-ethnic romance between a young Malay man and a Chinese girl. *Anak Sarawak* in 1989 dealt with a romance between a Chinese journalist and a Malay male civil servant in Sarawak (see Khoo, 2006). *Sepet*’s Chinese boy and Malay girl is therefore the first portrayal of inter-ethnic romance where a Chinese male romancing a Malay female.

¹³ The coalition party is comprised of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and other principles like the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and

others (Milne & Mauzy, 1986). Since independence, the BN model of government emerges as the only remedy to manage a multi-ethnic society in which studies suggest otherwise (Mandal, 2003). Amir Mohammad's new film "Apa Khabar Orang Kampung (Village People Radio Show) currently screen in the Berlin Film Festival explores the ethnic Malay members of the Communist Party of Malaya (Amir Mohammad, 2007a).

¹⁴ The construction of majority and minority discourse in Malaysia owed it due to the existing of the mass media during colonial period. A brief account of the history and development of the print media during British Malaya by Mustafa K. Anuar (2002) revealed the Anderson's concept of an imagined community formed through the existence and the distribution of the media. With economic developmental successes in the 1990s, the flourishing of mass media outlets in quantity under government's selective privatization does not liberated Malaysia and provided a greater democratic space for the Malaysian public. Interestingly, the consolidation of media and ownership throughout the history of Malaysia do not affect the clear distinctive line of ethnicity. For television, changes in ownership and control do not alter the allocation of television programs and time slots according to Malay, Chinese, Indian and, English languages. For daily newspapers and radios, there are dailies and stations generally deliver in the "national language" and there are the others, namely English, Chinese and Tamil (Zaharom Nain, 2002). Assumingly, Chinese programs on television, Chinese radio stations, and Chinese dailies are catered to the Chinese. Accordingly, Tamil language media are for the Indian community. Though from a civilize sense, the allocation is a fair share of communication spaces. However, to stay distinctively "ethnic" in term of media allocation is simultaneously to stay on the peripheral to the "national" – Malay language and thus ethnicity.

The same situation is applicable to Astro, Malaysia's cable television. Stations' line up in Astro also follows a clear distinctive ethnic/linguistic/nationalist line in which Ria Channel is Malay; two channels of AEC, one in Cantonese and one in Mandarin, are for the Chinese; and finally the diverse Indian community shares one Tamil Channel (Zaharom Nain, 1994 in Khoo, 2006). The apparent channel segregation implied the presumptuous notion by the government inline with models of global citizenship in which, as Khoo (2006) put it: Malaysian Cantonese speakers are encouraged to identify with Hong Kong fashion and sophistication via the satellite TV programs including soap operas, talk-shows, and Hong Kong pop, while Mandarin speakers can look outwards to the Taiwanese channel, which offers a "purer" Mandarin culture" (p. 112, more in Zaharom Nain and Wang, 2004).

¹⁵ In the colonial period, the administrative means and the recognition from the British colonial government gave the initial sense of the earlier unification ethnic Malay communities. As a single social community, the Malay nationalists and intellectuals during the pre-independent years were involved in various acts of redefinition and negotiation, and eventually settled with the three pillar of Malayness – *bahasa, agama, raja* (language, religion, and royalty). This act narrowly defined the Malay and rerouted the diverse local communities into peninsular based-Malay while cutting ties with the Indonesian counterparts (Tirtosudarmo, 2005; Milner, 1998).

¹⁶ Recent studies on what constitute the majority/minority discourses across countries of Asia and the Pacific revealed the reoccurrence notions of the consolidation of ethnic groups mainly by the ruling state (Barnard, 2004; Heng, 1998; Gladney, 1998a; Yoshino, 1998; Shamsul, 1998; Tirtosudarmo, 2005). A close examination on “majorities” in countries like Japan and China demonstrated the social constructionist nature of majority (Gladney, 1998b). Majority groups in these countries are marked by the state rather than a natural process. Gladney (1998b) also reveals the inconsistency construction of the Han Chinese across countries like China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In her quest into the Chinese Diaspora, Ang (2001b) further problematizes the notion of “Cultural China” to diasporic Chinese.

¹⁷ In Sabah, Malaysia, the Muslim Dusun is considered as an indigenous group, part of the *Bumiputera*, but not incorporated into the Malay like in Brunei.

¹⁸ João de Barros, a Portuguese historian, identified the people as jawi. To him they were “not natives of the land which they inhabit, but people who come from areas of China, because they imitate the Chinese in their appearance, the political system and their ingenuity in all mechanical work” (cited in Reid, 2001, p. 299). Reid (2001), however, concludes that “people of part-Chinese descent played some part in creating new mercantile elites, including those known to Barros as Jawi but to later observers as Melayu” (p. 299).

¹⁹ I am using “Taiwanese” here because sources, for example websites, do not clearly list Takeshi Kaneshiro’s nationality. He also does not have an official website. Most of information about him recounts his birthplace as Taiwan but to a Japanese father. There is no mention of his nationality.

²⁰ The compression of time here has ideological intention. Sultan Mahmud Shah (1488-1511) was believed to be a weak and mean leader that finally lost Melaka to the Portuguese (Stone, 1966). The intension in *PGL* is to legitimize the transferring of power from the royalty to the state. Milner (1998) has shown the ways in which newspaper writings and various policies during British Malaya fostered the shift of “Malay loyalty away from the old kerajaan toward the bangsa” (p. 167).

²¹ There was argument of, between Mahathir Mohamed and Anwar Ibrahim, who embodies the essence of Hang Tuah and which one is Hang Jebat in the 1998 political power showdown. Both Tuah and Jebat heroic acts are not static by situational. When Mahathir challenged the elites Malay in the 1970s, he was believed to embody the spirit of Hang Jebat, the nationalist. While who has the spirit of Jebat in 1998 is contested, Tuah’s loyalty is sometime referred as blind loyalty (more in Khoo, 2001; 2006).

²² For instance, in defending the pro-Malay NEP Halim Salleh (2000) proclaims that the Malay, with their socio-cultural production process and social identity “continue to be Malays in the full sense of ‘Malayness’” and “the Chineseness and the Indianness of others groups were preserved” (p. 138).

Likewise Shamsul (1997), who favors Mahathir's economic savvy "new Malay", writes that "one should then ask about the 'new Chinese,' 'new Indian,' 'New Kadazan,' 'New Iban' or, for that matter, the 'new Malaysians' which the NEP, directly or indirectly, has created" (p. 259). Shamsul's confidence in the "new Malaysians" mirrors the pragmatic state promotion of "unity in diversity" based on static construction of differences (Harindranath, 2006). His confidence of cause is extended from the crystallization of the Malay identity that forms the center core of ethnic in Malaysia while the "others" remain swinging around the outskirts. Or as Halim Salleh (2000) puts it that "it was possible for a Chinese to adapt the Malay language, idioms and even sensitivities, that is, becoming more or less like a Malay-defined Malaysian, and even feel as if he belonged to the country, yet remain distinctly Chinese" (p. 144). A notion of Chineseness that was encapsulated not by the Chinese themselves but by the ethnic fetish state, in which Carstens' study (2003) proves otherwise.

^{2 3} Ang (2001a) notes that Mahathir's anti-Western rhetoric is "a specification of the controversial 'clash of civilizations'" like that of Huntington (1996).

^{2 4} Mahathir's "Look East" cannot be discredited as a nationalist ideology as it was during the Japanese occupation of Malaya which favored the Malays at the expense of the Chinese that gave the Malay their political self-assurance (Singh, 2004).