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Citation
Chow, C. L. (2024). *The Multiple Sounds of Sinophone Malaysian Cinema: An analysis of the films by Chong Keat-aun, Lau Kek-huat and Edmund Yeo*.

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3947661

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Multiple Sounds of Sinophone Malaysian Cinema

An analysis of the films by Chong Keat-aun, Lau Kek-huat and Edmund Yeo

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MA Media Studies

Film and Photographic Studies

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June 2024

Abstract

Malaysia has played a significant role in its creation and production in Sinophone cinema, yet its pioneering contributions have often been underestimated in past decades. The early 2000s saw a resurgence of Sinophone Malaysian cinema with the Malaysian New Wave, led by independent filmmakers, which subsequently spurred a rise in Sinophone Malaysian film productions throughout the 2010s. This thesis examines multiple sounds of Sinophone Malaysian independent cinema in the 2010s, focusing on its linguistic and sonic elements in relation to the identity of Malaysian Chinese. It provides a close reading of four recent films by Malaysian Chinese filmmakers: "The Story of Southern Islet" (2020) directed by Chong Keat-aun, "Absent Without Leave" (2016) and "Boluomi" (2019) by Lau Kek-huat, and "Malu" (2020) by Edmund Yeo. The analysis centers on the role of multilingualism, creolized languages, accents, and sounds in constructing Malaysian Chinese identities, and representing diverse, sliding positions of minoritarian voices, as well as the ongoing tension between diaspora and anti-diaspora. In doing so, this thesis affirms the subjectivity of Sinophone Malaysian cinema and argues for its significance in studying the intersection between Sinophone cinema and Malaysian cinema.

Keywords:
Sinophone, Malaysia, soundscape, film sounds, accented speech, identity search, diaspora

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Introduction

In the world of Sinophone cinema, Malaysia has played a significant role in its creation and production. However, its pioneering contributions have often been underestimated in past decades and overshadowed by films from other Chinese-language regions such as China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. While the term "Chinese-language cinema" is commonly used by Chinese and English language scholars, there has been a persistent misconception that it originated in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1990s (Hee 2018, 33). This misconception was debunked by film scholar Hee Wai-Siam, who traced the cultural production of early Malayan and Singaporean Chinese-language cinema before and during the Cold War, arguing that the term "huayu dianying" (literally "Chinese-language cinema") actually first appeared in early Malayan and Singaporean Chinese-language news media. As such, "Chinese-language cinema" in the 1950s-60s context was defined as a plural concept, encompassing films in Chinese language from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Chinese-speaking regions. It also included films in all Chinese topolects, which was opposite to the currently prevailing belief that Mandarin is the singular Chinese language and other topolects are mere subdivisions of it. Such a definition is almost identical to the contemporary one promoted by Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. Not only so, it corresponds with the multilinguality of sounds emphasized in Shih Shu-mei's concept of Sinophone theory.

Malaysia had been absent from the Sinophone cinema during the period 1970s-90s, partly due to the cessation of film productions by Chinese-owned Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris. Post-independence cultural policies in Malaysia did not favor Chinese filmmakers, perpetuating a sense of sinophobia and marginalization. Additionally, Chinese-language films in the 1950s-60s were neglected under the Cold War anti-communism atmosphere, further diminishing Malaysia's cinematic legacy. Until the early 2000s, the Malaysian New Wave led by independent filmmakers marked a resurgence of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, and developed into the streams of commercial and arthouse cinema. The New Wave spurred a rise in Sinophone Malaysian film productions in the 2010s. Independent filmmakers has continued to seek

transnational funding for artistic freedom, bypassing local censorship and addressing taboo themes, with fuller acceptance abroad.

This thesis examines Sinophone Malaysian independent cinema in the 2010s, focusing on those produced with transnational funding and subject to domestic censorship. It first starts with a genealogy of Sinophone study and Sinophone Malaysian cinema which contextualize their past lives. The historical complexity and double marginality of Sinophone Malaysian cinema are believed to be a unique critical force to both parties, challenging their legitimate formation and frontiers. This thesis aims to clarify how the framework of Sinophone study tackles the limited perspective of Malaysian national cinema. Through multilingual and multi-topolectal articulations, Sinophone cinema "constantly challenges and redefines the boundaries of groups, ethnicities and national affiliations (Lu 2014, 22)." While Sinophone cinema denotes the range and field of Chinese-language cinema, this thesis attempts to reformulate the theory and rethink the vitality of Sinophone cinema for today's film studies.

Additionally, the thesis aims to affirm the subjectivity of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, to stand alone from the debates within Sinophone cinema and the narrow definition of national cinema. My research questions develop from both linguistic and sonic elements of Sinophone Malaysian cinema: what does the sound of Sinophone Malaysian cinema compose of? What does its accented style and soundscape sound like, and how do they relate to the identity of Malaysian Chinese? Eventually, how do they construct the subjectivity of Sinophone Malaysian cinema and converse with cinemas in the same region? Inspired by Shih Shiu-mei's notion that Sinophone is of multiple sounds, the questions register not only the multiplicity of Chinese language, but also how it undergoes localization and creolization in relation to the other languages. The Malaysian Mandarin accents, various languages and topolects together reveal the linguistic mosaic feature and multiethnic societies in Malaysia. The multiple sounds become its signature and define its position in Sinophone cinema. Shifting from the inclination towards dialogic content, the study of sounds and accents emphasizes the aural language and sonic element, and reveals the transformations within Chinese language.

To delve into the above questions, this thesis will examine four recent films made by Malaysian Chinese filmmakers. The films will be “The Story of Southern Islet” (2020) directed by Chong Keat-aun, “Absent Without Leave” (2016) and “Boluomi” (2019) by Lau Kek-huat, and “Malu” (2020) by Edmund Yeo.

Throughout the case studies, it will examine the role of multilinguality, accents and sounds in representing and constructing Malaysian Chinese identities, and the continuous tension between diaspora and anti-diaspora. It will be accomplished with the close-reading of the film examples. Finally, the thesis proposes a more fluid understanding of Sinophone Malaysian cinema and argues the significance of it being the intersection of Sinophone cinema and Malaysian cinema.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

Framing Sinophone cinema

In “Genealogies of Four Critical Paradigms in Chinese-Language Film Studies,” Sheldon H. Lu identified the four major paradigms: Chinese (national) cinema, transnational Chinese cinema, Chinese-language cinema, and Sinophone cinema. To address the complexities of the term “Chinese,” the modern nation-state, and the evolving nature of border-crossing film production and distribution, Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh translated the term “huayu dianying” to “Chinese-language cinema” in the early 2000s. This term was introduced to English-speaking academia to better capture these nuances. Chinese-language cinema refers to films predominantly in Chinese languages (Mandarin, dialects, and ethnic minority languages) and made in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora (Lu and Yeh 2005, 1). This definition goes beyond geopolitical and ideological boundaries, covering Chinese-language films in all regions. It reflects the diverse cultural, political, and linguistic backgrounds of various communities unified under the broad category of “Chinese-language speakers.” This term is widely accepted by both Chinese and English language film scholarship.

For the last paradigm, Sinophone cinema was formulated by Shih Shu-mei. Shih first defined Sinophone literature as “written in Chinese by Chinese-speaking writers in various parts of the world outside China” (2004, 29). In her 2007 book “Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific,” Shih expanded Sinophone studies to include visual culture, emphasizing visual media including cinema and television as key mediums. She redefined the Sinophone as “a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness,” highlighting its transnational nature (2007, 4). Shih’s concept removes the emphasis on ethnicity and nationality, shifting it to communities using Sinitic languages outside and on the peripheries of China. Thus, it conveys Sinophone as a site that introduces “difference, contradiction, and contingency” to the fixed Chinese identities (35).

In formulating the concept of the Sinophone, Shih was influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "minor literature," where "minor" refers to a minority constructing narratives within a dominant language (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 16). This framework offers a space for people to assert their collective becoming and reclaim their subjectivity through a "collective assemblage of enunciation" (18). As a result, the Sinophone highlights the process of minoritization in shaping identity, subjecthood, and citizenship for marginalized Sinitic communities residing within dominant host cultures. It includes Chinese-speaking regions such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau; areas where Sinitic languages are a minority (like Chinese diasporas in the United States and South America); and locations outside Greater China with Chinese-language communities (such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), excluding China itself. The Sinophone is characterized by "multiple sounds (polyphonic)" and "multiple orthographies (polyscriptic)", reflecting the multiplicity of Sinitic languages and their localization and creolization with non-Sinitic languages in different locales (Shih 2011, 716). Coining the concept of Sinophone, Shih's theory has ignited both praise and debate within international academia, marking the beginning of contemporary global research on the Sinophone.

Like Lu, who parts way from Shih's theory that the Sinophone is necessarily anti-hegemonic and exclusionary toward Mainland China. Lu challenges the notion of excluding China from the Sinophone's geographic and linguistic scope, arguing against viewing China solely as a "monolithic, colonial, oppressive geopolitical entity, or an intrinsically conservative concept" (Lu 2007). He contends that Sinophone cultural production from the margins is neither inherently postcolonial or counter-hegemonic. Similarly, David Der-wei Wang advocates for strategically extending the Sinophone to mainland Chinese literature, suggesting that China should be "included on the outside" (2006, 3). Later, Wang introduced a new term, "huayifeng," as the alternative understanding of the Sinophone. "Huayi" literally means "Chinese-foreign,"[1] while "feng" is a phonetic equivalent of "-phone" and literally means "wind." Also, "feng" can imply the meaning of "folk song," "custom," "temperament," and "scenery." Wang's

[1] Wang posits that the ancient Chinese character "yi" (夷) lacked a derogatory connotation, serving merely as a general term for foreigners among the Han Chinese, instead of "barbarian" (2020, 66).

interpretation thus emphasizes the dynamicity and fluidity of Chineseness and foreignness – they are like air currents that consistently flow and blend into each other (2015, iv).

Apart from reinterpreting the Sinophone as "huayifeng," Wang came to question whether this stance retains a Cold War perspective. Shih, however, reiterated that the Sinophone's targets of criticism are imperial in nature. It enables multidimensional critique and confronts various existing historical empires such as China-centrism, American white-centrism, and English language supremacy (Hee 2015, 175).

Reformulating Sinophone cinema

In this thesis, "Sinophone Malaysian cinema" is adopted to address the complexities of studying Chinese-language films in Malaysia. As Lu pointed out, the terms "Chinese-language cinema" and "Sinophone cinema" are almost interchangeable. However, Lu acknowledged that Sinophone cinema is particularly sensitive to issues of diaspora, identity-formation, colonialism and postcoloniality (2014, 23). Notably, Shih's conceptualization of the Sinophone highlighted China's internal colonialism and the settler colonialism of Sinophone communities. Indeed, it aptly fits the current situation of Malaysia, which is still grappling the aftermaths of the colonial and Cold War legacies; meanwhile, Malaysia is inseparable from the rivalry within Sinophone cinema. Lu's earlier idea that the term "Chinese-language cinema" could help scholars avoid the pitfalls of the politics of the modern Chinese nation-state has proven to be short-lived (20). The political rivalry between China and Taiwan over legitimate sovereignty has escalated in recent years, while the field of cinema cannot circumvent it.[2] Some critics predicted that the Chinese-

[2] In 2018, Taiwanese documentary director Fu Yue proclaimed in her award acceptance speech that she hoped "[Taiwan] can be regarded as an 'independent entity'" at the 55th Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. The furious debate on Taiwan independence and the "One China" policy raged beyond the award ceremony and escalated into diplomatic level. The following year, the China Film Administration banned mainland Chinese films and filmmakers from participating in the Golden Horse Awards. Hong Kong commercial film companies and filmmakers followed suit, either choosing not to join or withdrawing their registration. Meanwhile, China's Golden Rooster Awards was scheduled to be held on the same day as the Golden Horse Awards in 2019, and the boycott has continued since then. As of 2023, only independent filmmakers from China and Hong Kong participate in the Golden Horse Awards. Acclaimed as the most credible, diverse, and inclusive event in the Sinophone world, the spotlight of the Golden Horse Awards, as well as the Golden Horse Film Project Promotion, now directs towards Singaporeans and

Taiwan tension could mark a turning point for Malaysian Chinese filmmakers, offering them more opportunities to enter China's or Taiwan's film industry ("Golden Horse Awards 2023"). While more time is needed to examine this prediction, it is concerned the China-Taiwan tension within the Sinophone cinema may override the autonomous voice of Southeast Asian countries.

More importantly, Shih's eagerness to deconstruct China-centrism may overlook the soft power of Taiwan. It may form another possible risk as Chen Kuan-Hsing stated the sub-imperial desire of Taiwan and its "imperialist expansionist mentality," were indicated in "Go South Policy" launched in 1994 (2010, 19). [3,4] Though its effectiveness and scale may not be compared to China's "Belt and Road Initiative," scholars shall stay vigilant and critical of the other possible mechanisms of repression.

As Shih wrote, the Sinophone is mobilized as a method that "unsettles binaries and offers in their place the far richer potential of multidimensional critiques" (2010, 482), and therefore, the Sinophone should not exclude China as the "Sinophone vs China" dichotomy would only further strengthen, or re-centre China in the binary structure. Yiman Wang proposed the "alter-centring" approach as a methodology for advancing Sinophone film studies. It serves as "the other site that traverses the centre," in which the centre and the margin of China and the Sinophone are "best characterized by immanence, co-implication, even mutual constitution, rather than simple hegemony vs. resistance" (Wang 2014, 28). This approach is a negotiated and interactive structure, that lies in-between Shih's and David Wang's interpretations. Yiman Wang expands the understanding of the "-phone," of which underscores the literal meaning of "feng" as "wind", to include the affective and un-reified quality as well as the more sedimented semiotic and explicitly ideological meanings (40-1).

Malaysians-made films to discover more diverse creative works. In the 56th Golden Horse Awards, a total of 11 Malaysian filmmakers were shortlisted for 13 awards, which was an unprecedented number.

[3] Chen further explained, "capital accumulation in Taiwan had accelerated to the extent that within fifty years, the island had metamorphosed from a colony into a quasi-empire, no longer occupying a marginal position on the map of global capitalism. [...] it joined the game of imperialist competition by investing downward in order to seize markets, resources, and labor in less developed countries (20)."

[4] The policy was modified into "New Southbound Policy" in the 2000s and its office was established in 2016.

In this thesis, using the term "Sinophone cinema" inherits the multilingual Chinese languages in essence, and serves as a reminder of the complicated network it exists in, prompting us to stay alert to the Sinophone's internal colonialism and manipulative influences. Meanwhile, I will continue to adopt the Sinophone's emphasis on multiple sounds, in company with the use of Yiman Wang's "alter-centring approach." As Wang explains, the purpose of deconstructing the "Greater China" is not simply to break it into pieces, but to foreground the entangled interconnectedness that underpins the constantly re-collaged map of Sinophone cinema (2014, 42). It attends to the sliding positions of minoritarian voices including "resistance, intervention, subversion, acquiescence and replication of the centre (28)." Sinophone Malaysian cinema faces not only China-centrism within the Sinophone, but also Malay-centrism in Malaysia. Thus, this thesis aims to underline how creolized and accented Sinitic languages serve as the minoritarian voice that slides between them.

Apart from that, this thesis attempts to reformulate the Sinophone cinema through tackling its sound. As scholars pointed out, the Sinophone studies was developed on the basis of literature that conveys in the form of "Sinitic written languages," implanting it into film studies may lead to its limitations. As Alvin K. Wong argues, "dual emphasis on linguistic specificity and global visuality can function as both the theoretical rigor and limits of the Sinophone" (2015, 92). While the audio-visual medium of film enables it to mediate not only spoken languages, he believes the central question of Sinophone "privileges the linguistic and hence the literary, over and against the aural, the sonic, and the audible. (92-3)"[5]

While it is more than urgent for Sinophone Malaysian cinema to assert its autonomy from either the "China vs Western" and "China vs Taiwan" discourses, it is important to reformulate the Sinophone corresponding to its limitation on the "aural, sonic, and audible." Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the minoritarian voices and sounds of Sinophone Malaysian cinema

[5] Nevertheless, Wong acknowledged the Sinophone's insistence on the linguistic specificity recognizes the creolization of language. It is a change in the timbre, sound, and volatility of language because of centuries-long community formations in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia, Sinitic language and topolects from Southern China share linguistic space with Malay and Tamil. Sinitic cultural productions in Malaysia, that Sinophone Malaysian cinema is one of them, can be recognized through manifold Cantonese, Hakka and other linguistic inflections in the form of creolized language and accents (92). Together they provide a marker of difference and non-conformity to the standard Mandarin and Sinophone cinema.

through their "sliding positions"– including accents, creolized spoken languages, soundscape and music. These sounds are believed to constitute the materiality of the voice that constitutes Malaysia's own autonomy and position beyond the post-colonial shadow.

Framing Sinophone Malaysian cinema

The first Sinophone Malayan film, "New Friend," was directed by Low Pui-kim in 1927, marking the beginning of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema (Hee 2019, 26). In the late 1950s, Malayan-born director Yi Shui advocated for "Malayanised" Chinese-language films made by Malayan filmmakers to reflect local life and integrate diverse cultures (144-5). [6] This initiative, though brief, marked another key moment in promoting localization and self-representation in Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

However, after the separation of Malaya and Singapore in 1965, Malaysia's cultural and language policies became unfavorable to Sinophone Malaysian cinema, shifting toward reinforcing Malaysian nationalism. This trend intensified after the May 13 Incident in 1969, leading to initiatives like the New Economic Policy and the National Culture Policy, which promoted Malay cultural dominance. The establishment of the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) aimed to promote Malaysian identity through films and regulate the industry.[7] To support local film productions, FINAS introduced the "Entertainment Tax Scheme" and the "Compulsory Screening Scheme."[8] Yet, the FINAS Act 1981 required films to

[6] According to Yi, the Malayanised Chinese-language films should not only portray the realities of Malayan life but also be created by Malayan filmmakers (Hee 2019, 145). Yi's advocacy was in response to Malaya's independence from British rule in 1957, showing his concern for the Chinese community's future. Additionally, as Hee pointed out, Yi consciously defined "Chinese-language cinema" as including Mandarin and various topolects, reflecting his observation of the diverse linguistic landscape of the Chinese community in Malaya and Singapore (140).

[7] The New Economic Policy and the National Culture Policy were introduced the following year to address the inequality between "Bumiputera" and "non-Bumiputera," promoting the primacy of Malay culture and interests (Lee 2014, 200). The term "Bumiputera," which translates to "natives of the soil," was coined in the 1970s and incorporated into the Constitution, encompassing the Malay and indigenous populations of Sabah and Sarawak. "[A]s the natives, they have a special historic and natural relationship with the land of the region that the colonizers and immigrants do not have." This classification allowed the Malays to legitimize their political dominance and status as the privileged natives (Daniels 2005, 40-1).

[8] "Entertainment Tax Scheme" aimed to incentivize local production by refunding 25% of the domestic box office revenue to certified local films, while and "Compulsory Screening Scheme" ensured that local films were screened in major cinemas for at least two weeks to enhance their competitiveness against foreign films (Lee 2022, 51-2).

have 70% Bahasa Malaysia dialogue to be recognized as "Malaysian films" and benefited from the two schemes (Kuan 2015, 180). These regulations thus categorized films in other languages as "foreign," making Malaysian cinema Malay-centric and excluding ethnic Chinese filmmakers.[9]

Sinophone Malaysian cinema was marginalized and rendered invisible by the Malay-centric national cinema, as government interventions increasingly controlled film production, distribution, and exhibition.[10] The mainstream and national cinema, dominated by Malay-language films, primarily targeted Malay-speaking audiences by featuring Malay actors and focusing on Malay culture. Non-Malay actors were often depicted as stereotypes: "the comic Indian, the greedy Chinese middleman, and the promiscuous Eurasian woman" (Khoo 2007, 230).

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, a new generation of independent Malaysian filmmakers emerged, driven by globalization, transnational cinema, and the rise of digital technology. The accessibility and ease of use of digital video cameras and editing software empowered young filmmakers to create their own movies. This underground filmmaking movement, known as the "Malaysian New Wave," thrived on low budgets and guerrilla-style production methods. These digital films were typically made without the expectation of being shown in Malaysia's heavily censored mainstream cinemas (Khoo 2007, 228). Notably, many of these independent filmmakers were ethnic Chinese, including Ho Yuhang, James Lee, Woo Min-jin, Tan Chui-mui, and Liew Seng-tat. The rise of Chinese-language digital films presented a challenge to Malaysian cinema, as they did not fit neatly within the narrow definition of "national cinema." Their presence was significant, especially as they garnered recognition and awards at international film festivals representing Malaysia (Raju 2008, 70). Despite this, official responses were mostly symbolic, offering little concrete support.[11] Nonetheless, the Malaysian New Wave marked a

[9] Other than that, only Malay-language films made by Malaysians were eligible to represent Malaysia at international exhibitions and festivals (Sarji 2006, 144).

[10] To reduce the influence and control of Chinese-owned film companies, state-funded cinemas were created to compete directly with Chinese-owned cinemas, and independent cinemas were taken over by FINAS (Lee 2022, 52).

[11] In 2005, independent filmmakers whose works were invited to the 34th International Film Festival Rotterdam, including Ho Yuhang, James Lee, Tan Chui-mui, Amir Muhammad, Deepak Kumaran, and Azharr Rudin, received official recognition from FINAS, which provided them with MYR21,000 in financial assistance (approximately

resurgence of Sinophone Malaysian cinema in the new millennium, challenging the conventional definition of Malaysian national cinema.

The partial success of Malaysian New Wave filmmakers spurred a rise in Sinophone Malaysian productions, which gradually branched into commercial and arthouse streams. In the commercial realm, notable filmmakers include Chiu Keng-guan, Ah Niu, and Namewee. On the arthouse side, independent filmmakers like Chong Keat-aun, Tan Seng-kiat, Lau Kek-huat, and Edmund Yeo sought transnational funding and co-production opportunities through international film festival awards and markets. These transnational networks for producing, exhibiting, and distributing their films provided filmmakers with greater artistic freedom and integrity, allowing them to bypass strict local censorship and address diverse, often taboo, themes in Malaysian society.[12] When shown domestically, their films frequently faced censorship demands, highlighting the contrast in reception between local and international audiences. Thus, many Sinophone Malaysian films are often "complete" only when screened abroad.

The evolving Sinophone Malaysian cinema has challenged traditional definitions of Malaysian national cinema and prompted real changes. In 2010, the self-financed box-office success "Ice Kacang Puppy Love" did not qualify for the entertainment tax rebate because it did not meet the 70% Malay-language requirement. The film director publicly contested FINAS's rejection on a Taiwanese variety show, sparking significant debate in Malaysia. As a result, under pressure from the public, opposition parties, and even the ruling parties, FINAS revised its policy. Films subtitled in Bahasa Malaysia, produced in Malaysia for more than half of their duration, and with over 50% Malaysian ownership were to be considered "local film" and eligible for the rebate (Hee 2018, 77-8). This is seen as a pivotal moment for Sinophone

EUR4,000) (Khoo 2007, 229). However, Malaysian Chinese filmmakers still faced significant challenges in securing state funding. For instance, Ho Yuhang applied for FINAS financial support to convert his work for submission to the Pusan International Film Festival but received only one-tenth of the requested funds. The reason given was that the film was not sufficiently multicultural to represent Malaysia (Khoo 2008, 38).

[12] Strict film censorship has been enforced in Malaysia since the early 1980s and is currently overseen by the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia. Films are expected to steer clear of causing controversy or uncertainty among Malaysians. Topics such as race, religion, politics, crime, violence, brutality, and horror are considered "sensitive and precarious issues." Additionally, scenes involving kissing, swearing, and themes related to homosexuality, sex, and interracial relationships are completely banned (Lee 2022, 34).

Malaysian cinema's recognition as part of Malaysian cinema. Its alternative position is highlighted as it enriches Malaysian cinema by including all Malaysian-made films in various languages.

However, defining Sinophone Malaysian cinema can be complex. Firstly, although it is primarily identified by linguistic and phonetic characteristics, films like Tsai Ming-liang's, known for minimal dialogue or even silence, may stretch these boundaries. Secondly, filmmakers of Chinese ethnicity such as James Lee, Woo Ming-jin, and Amanda Nell Eu do not necessarily make films in Sinitic languages but in English and Malay. Some, like Tan Chui-mui, Edmund Yeo, and Ho Yuhang, use multiple languages in their different films. Thirdly, some Malaysian Chinese filmmakers, like Sam Quah and Ho Wi-ding, begin their careers and achieve success in China and Taiwan rather than in Malaysia.

In this thesis, it does not aim to include all films made by Malaysian Chinese filmmakers within the framework of Sinophone Malaysian cinema. Just like the Sinophone aims to remove the focus on ethnicity, it focuses on exploring the boundaries, particularly through the study of the multiple sounds. Despite the aforementioned reasons may pose challenges to the classification, they contribute to the unique and fluid landscape of "huayifeng" within Sinophone Malaysian cinema that oscillates between "Chineseness" and "foreignness." As David Wang noted, "Who is Chinese, who is foreign, the markers of identity fluctuate unrestrictedly" (2020, 59).

The multiple sounds of Sinophone Malaysian Cinema

At home, Malaysian Chinese are still often described as foreigners and minorities by politicians during the conflicts between supporters and opponents of the incumbent political regime (Yow 2016, 277). Meanwhile, in the realm of Sinophone cinema, their creolized languages and Malaysian accents are seen as "foreign" compared to standard Mandarin. To specify the linguistic and phonetic features of the Sinophone Malaysian Cinema, the following illustrates how the multiple sounds are shaped.

1. “Huayu/Chinese language”

The term “huayu/Chinese language” can be interpreted broadly or narrowly. In its broader scope, it refers to the languages utilized by Chinese communities, encompassing not only Mandarin but also all topolects spoken by Chinese groups, including Hokkien (under Southern Min), Cantonese (under the branch of Yue), Hakka, and more (qtd. in Hee 2019, 8).[13] Conversely, in its narrower definition, “huayu” signifies the common language spoken by Chinese people, referred to as standard mandarin and excluding topolects.

The narrow definition is embodied in the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” launched in 1979 by the Government of Singapore. The campaign encourages the Chinese Singaporean population to speak more standard mandarin Chinese, promoting it as a common language among the community. Topolects are therefore discouraged to speak, as implied as hindering the learning of Mandarin. This initiative was followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association and implemented in Chinese schools in Malaysia. Using Mandarin was regarded as unity of the Chinese community, corresponding to and opposing the Malay-centric national policies. As a result, the broad definition has been replaced by the narrow sense.

The broader definition of “huayu/Chinese language” was more common in the 1950s-60s. Before that, films were mainly divided into Mandarin (“guoyu,” meaning national language), Cantonese and Amoyese. The term “huayu pian/Chinese language cinema,” encompassing all films in Mandarin and topolects, gained traction especially through the 1950s political movement. As Malay language was elevated to the status of national language for the independent Malaya in 1957, the term “guoyu/national language” had to give way, which confirmed the legitimacy to the catch-all term “huayu/Chinese language” (Hee 2019, 10-1). It

[13] The universally recognized Sinitic languages include 7-13 regional groups, covering Mandarin (官話), Wu (吳), Xiang (湘), Gan (贛), Hakka (客家), Min (閩) and Yue (粵). They are unintelligible to each other, so do their subgroups and many of the other varieties within the same group (Handel 2017, 87). While scholars estimate there are several hundred of mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese, American sinologist Victor H. Mair further classifies Amoyese, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, and more as “distinct languages within the Chinese or Sinitic group” (qtd. in Handel 2017, 85; Mair 1991, 13). Consequently, he advocates for the term “topolects” to neutrally describe these Sinitic languages, instead of calling them “dialects” which means subdivisions of the national language Mandarin (Mair 1991, 6-8).

serves as the greatest common factor within the Chinese community, facilitating cultural identity and distinguishing their languages from Malay and English (29).

In today's Malaysia, there are about 6.9 million of the Chinese population ("Demographic Statistics"), constituting 22.6% of the total population. Their spoken languages vary from Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Hainanese, Teochew, and Hokchew. While Mandarin is the lingua franca for Chinese and taught in National-type School (Chinese), other topolects are from southern provinces of China.[14] The prevalence of topolects varies by geographical location, with many Malaysian Chinese speak in Cantonese or Hokkien due to exposure to media and regional influences.[15] In recent years, although Chinese topolects still maintain their strongholds as regional languages, some linguistic scholars noticed the Chinese families have been undergoing a language shift that is moving away from the topolects of their origin to Mandarin and English (Ang 2010, 73).

2. Creolized languages

Most Malaysian Chinese youth are trilingual, speaking Mandarin, Malay, and English alongside their native topolect and the predominant Chinese topolect(s) in their living area.[16] When they speak in a certain language, the sentence often mixes in other languages and topolects. It encompasses borrowing, code-mixing and variation of languages and embodied in the unit of word, phrase or sentence. Shifting quickly from different languages and topolects help the

[14] The initial influx of Chinese migrants from southern China occurred between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their descendants, along with the indigenous population, are known as "Baba-Nyonya," forming the multicultural Peranakan community. In the late nineteenth century, following the British settlement in Penang and Singapore, another wave of Chinese migration to the Malay Peninsula took place, primarily from the Fujian and Guangdong provinces. These newer Chinese communities are referred to as "xinke" (literally meaning immigrants).
[15] Hokkien is the largest Sinitic language group in Malaysia, with regions such as Melaka, Johor, Penang, Kedah, Sarawak, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Labuan predominantly speaking Hokkien. In contrast, Cantonese is more commonly spoken in areas like Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang. The frequent broadcasting of Hong Kong soap operas and movies has contributed to the widespread use of Cantonese among Malaysian Chinese. However, in southern Malaysia, which is closer to Singapore, residents often watch Singaporean programs, resulting in Mandarin and Hokkien being the main languages spoken there.
[16] For over a century, Malay, English, and Mandarin have been the most widely spoken languages in Malaysia. Malay, being the sole official language, has become a significant working language for Malaysian Chinese. English, which was the official language in government settings during the colonial era, remains an important language in Malaysia today (Khoo 2017, 66).

speaker to adopt varied linguistic expressions, inflections, and intonations. The creolized Chinese language includes blending of Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages, which reflects the long-term localization of the Chinese community in the multilingual and multicultural society of Malaysia. Creolization is a mutual process that also happens in Malay which borrows words, grammar, expression from Chinese and English languages. Moreover, there are vocabularies which combine Malay and Chinese language.

In addition to the linguistic process, creolization incorporates socio-cultural aspects which become a part of the identity of Malaysian Chinese. Many of the Sinophone Malaysian writers only recognize the creolization of "Malaysianness" that informs their sense of culture, history and language after they emigrate to Taiwan (Bernards 2012, 313). Sinophone Malaysian cinema illustrates this by showcasing the linguistic and cultural mosaic in Malaysia, positioning itself at the crossroads of Chinese language and Malaysian culture. Furthermore, creolization establishes a deterritorialized space for cultural production, which aligns with David Wang's concept of a fluid Sinophone cinema.

3. Accents

Due to Malaysia's unique language environment, the Mandarin spoken by Malaysian Chinese (referred to as Malaysian Mandarin) exhibits a number of unique linguistic features as compared to Mandarins in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore (Khoo 2017, 67). Accent is one of the most notable features and the accented style of Malaysian Chinese becomes the signature of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Accent can be understood as the "cumulative auditory effect of those features of pronunciation which identify where a person is from, regionally or socially" (Crystal 2009, 3). Everyone speaks with an accent that emphasizes specific words or syllables in their speech. Those who speak a second or third language often carry accents influenced by their native tongue and regional nuances. Accents can vary based on factors such as social status, religious beliefs, educational level, and political affiliation (Asher 1994, 9). While all accents are linguistically equal, they hold different social and political values. Accents often influence how

speakers are perceived in terms of social status and personality: some may be associated with regionalism and perceived as less educated, while standard accent speakers are viewed as sophisticated and of higher social status (Naficy 2001, 23-24).

In this sense, Malaysian Mandarin is considered "accented" and clearly distinguished from standard Mandarin. Examples include the pronunciation of words in a checked tone (a syllable that ends with an abrupt stop), and inclusion of expressive modal particles (like "lah," "meh," "lor"), which are uncommon in standard Mandarin but show heavy influence from Cantonese and Hokkien. Also, Malaysian Mandarin sounds relatively flat, as it is often pronounced as nonretroflex and in the first-tone, whereas the standard Mandarin is pronounced with more variations in retroflexion, unstressed syllable and distinct differences between tones (Khoo 2017, 71-72).

In 2004, the semi-governmental Chinese Language Standardization Council of Malaysia was established.[17] It is to regulate the use of the Chinese language in Malaysia, including translation, phonetics, grammar, words and text. However, the attempts to standardize Malaysian Mandarin arouse opposing opinions in the public, as some of them defy the words commonly used by Malaysian Chinese.

As one may notice, the rivalries between the definitions of "Chinese language" and "standard and localized mandarin" share the same question in essence: how and how much "Chineseness" shall be retained while being a Malaysian citizen. In fact, Malaysian Chinese filmmakers are conscious of the differences between Malaysian Chinese languages and the Chinese language spoken by other Sinophone communities. However, they do not shy away with its "impurity" and "substandardness", while they are conscious of their upbringing that they are borned and raised in Malaysia with an ancestral root from China. This thesis argues by using multiple sounds (multilingually, creolized language and accented style) and demonstrating different "sliding positions of minoritarian voices" as Yiman Wang proposed, the Malaysian Chinese filmmakers create a space of diversity in order to vocalize their identity searching.

[17] The Council was restructured to come under the Ministry of Education in 2006.

Consequently, their films together proclaim the fluidity and identity of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Structure of the thesis

The film examples to be studied in this thesis are recent works of Sinophone Malaysian independent cinema. All involved transnational funding and production crew, these films mark distinct levels of diaspora/anti-diaspora dynamics and reflects the living conditions of the Chinese community in Malaysia, as depicted through the sounds and languages utilized in their films. They represent diverse sliding positions of minoritarian voices. Moreover, the circulation of these films demonstrates varying degrees of intersection between Sinophone cinema and Malaysian cinema.

Chapter two studies the constitution of "multiple sounds" and soundscapes of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema. The chapter will analyze the delicate sound design in Chong Keat-aun's feature debut "The Story of Southern Islet" (2020). The soundscapes in film, together with the offscreen and non-diegetic sounds, reveal the daily lives of the Chinese community, their double marginality living in Malaysia, and struggles they encounter during the process of localization. This chapter argues how soundscape and sounds transverse the national and cultural boundaries in Malaysia, and at the same time, constitute the sonic identity of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Chapter three discusses the relationship between languages, accents and identity. While drawing on Hamid Naficy's concept of "accented cinema," the chapter will analyze two films made by Lau Kek-huat, including the documentary "Absent Without Leave" and feature film "Boluomi" (co-directed with Vera Chen). Both films center around former members of Malayan Communist Party and their descendants, who have been muted from the official history of Malaysia and forced to leave the country. This chapter argues that, through investigating the languages and accents of the exiled and displaced, it reveals the entangled relationship between diaspora and anti-diaspora, as well as tension within self-identity. Although the two films could

not be shown at home due to the sensitive theme, Lau's powerful works do not only contribute to Sinophone Malaysian cinema, but also a challenge to the official historical narrative.

After exploring issues of identity search and self-positioning, chapter four transitions to discussing the relationship between mobility and language at the boundaries of Sinophone Malaysian cinema. The film analyzed in this chapter is Edmund Yeo's "Malu," a Malaysian-Japanese-French co-production set in Malaysia and Japan. Yeo's transnational filmmaking trajectory, along with the protagonists' cross-border experiences, expands the map of Sinophone Malaysian cinema and test the capacity and limit of speech. By examining the speech, tone, and accent in this film, the chapter argues that the language barriers encountered through mobility create a space for resolving complex memories associated with home and homeland.

In conclusion, I will summarize my analysis and address both the potential significance and limitation of this thesis. I will conclude it with a discussion on how the study of multiple sounds can contribute to a more fluid and comprehensive understanding of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Chapter 2

Sounds and Boundaries – Chong Keat-aun's "The Story of Southern Islet"

What do "multiple sounds" of Sinophone Malaysian cinema entail? Within Sinophone studies, the term refers to languages, topolects, and accents, while in Sinophone cinema, it mainly refers to dialogues and songs. However, the sounds we encounter in daily life extend beyond verbal communication to encompass both artificial and natural sounds. Together, the mixture of sounds forms the soundscape, representing the auditory characteristics of a given place or period perceived by individuals. In film studies, film sounds are more than just speech which include ambient sounds, music, sound effects, and more. Michel Chion argues that film sounds are "rendered," indicating the audiovisual relationship is not innate but artificially constructed. Sound is manipulated and added to the image, creating an illusion of unity so the spectators believe sounds to be truthful. In fact, rendered sounds convey an experience with a certain extent of fidelity, rather than a literal replication. They shape our understanding of images and direct our attention (Chion and Gorbman 2019, 98-9). Through the analysis of "The Story of Southern Islet," this chapter examines how its sounds render the soundscape and life experiences of Malaysian Chinese.

"The Story of Southern Islet" unfolds in the backdrop of 1987's Kedah, a remote state nestled in northern Malaysia near the Thai border. Cheong, the protagonist, supports his family by vending dried seafood in the local market. However, his life takes a drastic turn after a heated argument with his neighbor, he falls severely ill. As Cheong's health deteriorates, the narrative pivots to focus on his wife, Yan. While looking for a remedy to cure Cheong, Yan becomes the breadwinner of the family of four. Unlike her husband, who is highly devout in traditional religious beliefs, the western-educated Yan does not believe Cheong has been cursed by offending a deity or cursed by revengeful black magic. But after witnessing Cheong vomit blood with rusty nails and increasingly bedridden with exhaustion for several months, Yan desperately turns to seek help from local shamans. The heroine then embarks on a spiritual journey fraught with strange encounters and unearthly experiences. Ultimately, under the guidance of a Malay

shaman and with the help of a local deity, Yan successfully lifts the curse afflicting her husband, banishing the evil spirit into the open sea.

The semi-autobiographical film was written based on the filmmaker's childhood memories. It was filmed in his hometown, Kedah, to ensure an authentic portrayal of its environmental charm. The obscure location and story setting scared off potential investors from China and Taiwan. Even for Malaysians, the region remained relatively unknown. Despite multiple script revisions, Chong faced repeated setbacks to secure funding in Kuala Lumpur. Completed with a tight budget, "The Story of Southern Islet" earned Chong several awards, including the Best New Director Award and the NETPAC Award at the 57th Golden Horse Awards in Taipei, as well as FIPRESCI Prize at the 45th Hong Kong International Film Festival. With the international recognition and congratulatory messages from FINAS and the Minister of Communications and Multimedia, "The Story of Southern Islet" marks the success of the margins – a Chinese Malaysian filmmaker hailing from the rural Kedah (Mokhtar, "An 'uncensored' film").

Prior to his directorial debut, Chong had immersed himself in Malaysia's creative industry for over a decade, engaging in various roles such as radio presenter, performing artist, cultural advocate and activist. Renowned for his dedication to preserving Chinese cultural heritage, particularly oral traditions in different Sinitic languages, Chong meticulously documented Chinese operas, folk songs, oral histories, and tales from elders across the nation. Proficient in manipulating sonic elements in performance, Chong's use of sounds in "The Story of Southern Islet" transcends ethnic boundaries, amplifying the "multiple sounds" of Sinophone Malaysian cinema while fostering communication with Malaysian national cinema.

This chapter embarks on an exploration of the deterritorializing potential of the "multiple sounds" depicted in "The Story of Southern Islet," which begins with an examination of the construction of national and ethnic boundaries. Next, this chapter delves into the film's soundscape, encompassing the following aspects: (1) languages, topolects, and on-the-air sounds, (2) animistic soundscape and non-diegetic sounds, and (3) folktale, Nanguan and diaspora. These

auditory components, known as minoritarian voices, come together to shed light on the lived experiences of Malaysian Chinese and challenge the hegemonic center.

The construction of boundaries

In the contemporary geopolitical context, "boundaries" serve as unequivocal markers of state territory, delineating the extent of direct administrative control and embodying centripetal forces (Kristof 272). They distinctly separate territories, states, or societies. Conversely, "frontiers" denote political and geographical areas near or beyond boundaries, characterized by varying degrees of state or societal influence, fostering potential interaction with external entities. Frontiers serve as meeting points where diverse societies or states engage, potentially leading to integration or mutual influence.

The borders of present-day Southeast Asian countries are products of colonialism, demarcated by the territorial control of the former colonial rulers. These borders are thus more of an arbitrary imposition, lacking distinct cultural or ecological rationale. Consequently, Southeast Asian countries are multi-ethnic entities, housing a blend of cultures and social systems within their boundaries (Kratoska 3). After gaining independence, these new nation-states urgently sought to justify their existence, drive modernization, and foster national development. The geographical boundaries established by colonial rulers not only went unchallenged, but were also inherited or even actively embraced by successor states in order to reinforce state control, unity and identity (3-4).[18] While geographical boundaries solidified statehood, the concept extended to socio-cultural domains to centralize ruling power.

For ethnic boundaries, they emerge from patterns of social interaction, reinforcing self-identification among in-group members and confirming group distinctions by outsiders. They involve insiders and outsiders mutually acknowledging group differences in cultural beliefs,

[18] Despite increased border control, significant flows of trade, capital, and labor persisted across Southeast Asia. It is noteworthy that scholars point out that since the 1950s, changes in urbanization, industrialization, and transport have reshaped the region. New mapping is thus suggested to measure the transnational flows, viewing Southeast Asia as an open system with urban corridors, dominated by urban middle classes, rendering national borders less relevant (Nordholt 2018, 47).

practices, and geographical origins, which are foreign to their own cultures. These ethnic boundaries persist due to both objective factors and subjective judgments accumulated through interaction and collective memory. Even after several decades, "the native-born generations of an ethnic group often continue to be identified by outsiders, and in-group members may self-identify, in terms of their foreign origin" (Sanders 327-8).

In Malaysia, the construction of "Malayness" and "Chineseness" by politicians perpetuated ethnic distinctions. After independence, the bumiputera privileges entrenched in the Malaysian Constitution marginalized the Chinese and Indian populations, solidifying their outsider status.[19] In response, the Chinese community defended Chinese-language education as a bastion of identity, enhancing Mandarin's status as the lingua franca among Malaysian Chinese (Hee 2018, 192-3). Consequently, mutually constructed ethnic boundaries become formidable barriers hindering peaceful conversations. Such tensions are depicted in "The Story of Southern Islet" through dialogues and on-the-air sounds.

Languages, topolects and on-the-air sounds

As the film unfolds in the Thai-Malaysian border, the local populace is predominantly comprised of Malays and Thais, with a smaller contingent of Chinese. The composition of the community manifests in its linguistic diversity, with dialogue spanning Hokkien, Mandarin, Malay, and Thai. Within Malaysian Chinese households, linguistic variations are common across generations, evident in four aspects: spouses, parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and among siblings (Ang 2010, 73). Various factors such as differing places of birth and ancestral origins contribute to this linguistic diversity. While parental influence significantly shapes familial language dynamics, subsequent generations may diverge due to disparities in educational backgrounds and job requirements (84).

[19] While "bumiputera" refers to "natives of the soil," their political dominance and socio-economic privileges are endorsed by the Constitution. As written in Article 153, the interpretation of bumiputera privileges slowly shifted from a temporary measure and affirmative action to an internalized precondition of Malaysian society (Puthucheary 2008, 15).

Within Cheong's family, Hokkien emerges as the predominant spoken language. Both Cheong and Yan converse in Hokkien, the linguistic heritage passed down to their two sons as their mother tongue. However, when communicating with her young sons, Yan consciously switches to Mandarin, which is a common practice between Chinese parents in a bid to nurture their children's proficiency in the language (Tan 2000, 56). At home, the boys engage in Hokkien conversations with family members and neighbors but are mandated to converse in Mandarin at school.

There is a poignant scene when An, the eldest son, is being punished at school. The boy is compelled to stand on his chair. A sign with the words "speak more Mandarin, speak less topolects" hangs around his neck. This scene refers to the broader sociopolitical landscape of Malaysia, symbolizing the impact of the Speak Mandarin Campaign.[20] Initiated in 1980, the campaign promoted Mandarin as the lingua franca within the Chinese community. Though not an official mandate, it was rigorously enforced in Chinese vernacular schools with a blend of incentives and penalties. The campaign aimed to foster cohesion and bolster the ethnic identity as Chinese, strengthening ethnic boundaries to differentiate themselves from the mainstream Malay society. However, akin to the boy's silence in class, the campaign's success came at the expense of silencing other Sinitic languages. When topolects lost their social utility in schools and public life, the diverse linguistic landscape and "multiple sounds" of the Sinophone community was compromised. The film illustrates the immediate effects of this campaign, depicting the competitive dynamics among Sinitic languages and topolects.[21] Even after class, An's peers refuse to converse with him in their native tongues, apprehensive of punitive measures from their teachers. Such a fear stifles linguistic expression among schoolchildren, while a compulsory nationalism is reinforced under the Speak Mandarin Campaign. Consequently, Malaysian Chinese were confronted with a dilemma: they must choose between preserving their mother tongue as well as linguistic diversity, and assimilating into the broader Chinese community.

[20] Background of "Speak Mandarin Campaign" can be found in introduction of this thesis.

[21] The repercussions of this linguistic purism remain to this day, with the narrow definition of "Chinese" as Mandarin widely embraced (Hee 2019, 8-9).

Another coercive imposition of nationalism is articulated through pervasive on-the-air sounds. These diegetic sounds, emanating from radio and television broadcasts within the film, travel freely in space yet remain anchored in the real time of the scene (Chion and Gorbman 2009, 482). The on-the-air sounds in the film, comprising the Malaysian national anthem and patriotic advertisements and news reports, serve as a conduit for one-way and top-down communication dictated by the state. Despite the patriotic messages such as "loyalty and unity from us all will drive the country's progress to a greater height" and "unite as one, together we progress" are delivered with a gentle voice, their undertone is one of authoritative command. These on-the-air sounds demand unwavering unity and loyalty, projecting the state's influence from the political epicenter to the border state of Kedah. These sounds pervade everyday life, disrupting the local soundscape and enforcing a monolithic patriotism and absolute conformity upon the commoners. These broadcasts are not confined solely to Malay, the official language, but also extend to standard Mandarin, underscoring the state's grip on broadcasting and media communication.

Moreover, the on-the-air sounds spread deep-seated racial tensions across the nation. Through television programs and radio interviews, Yan learns about the Ministry of Education's appointment of supervisors lacking Chinese-language credentials in Chinese vernacular schools (Jomo 4). It refers to a real-life political flashpoint in 1987, as the appointment triggered Chinese protests and soon escalated into a Malay-Chinese racial rivalry and governmental repression.[22] The racial tension and the infamous crackdown "Operation Lalang" overlapped with the film's setting in October 1987.[23] While the film refrains from visually portraying the political and racial turmoil, the on-the-air sounds regarding the appointment foreshadow state violence and societal unrest simmering beneath the surface. These broadcasts extend their reach to Kedah, exacerbating Yan's already burdensome responsibilities as caretaker and provider. Yan is

[22] The ministry's appointment of 200 supervisors quickly aroused suspicions in the Chinese community that the Malay government was interfering in Chinese education. This action eventually ignited racial clashes between Chinese demonstrators and Malay political groups supporting the decision. The state intervened abruptly to halt the racial tensions, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of opposition political leaders, teachers, and students, as well as the shutdown of newspaper agencies. This crackdown instilled fear in the Chinese community that a recurrence of the violence experienced during the May 13 Incident in 1969 might occur.

[23] The film period was set between August and October 1987. While the protests against the education appointment were held in early October, the Operasi Lalang was launched on 27 October 1987.

overwhelmed by these penetrating sounds and news which pushes her to the verge of emotional breakdown.

Chong's film portrays language as a battleground for ethnic factions, where linguistic divisions serve to reinforce ethnic boundaries. Sounds, similarly, are politicized tools utilized by authorities to issue directives to the citizens. However, the filmmaker's intent is not to accuse sounds or any particular language but rather to underscore their neutrality and arbitrariness. Despite the escalating Malay-Chinese tensions in the political sphere, glimpses of reconciliation emerge within grassroots communities. In the end of the film, Yan seeks assistance from a Malay shaman, who aids in lifting the curse afflicting her husband. The shaman provides her with a tape recording featuring Malay chanting and a keris to expel the evil spirit, with the latter being a ceremonial dagger symbolizing Malay political power. This fictional representation counters the real-life protest banner of the Malay political group UMNO Youth that depicted a keris and threatening words like "soak it in Chinese blood," heightening racial tensions in 1987 (Case 43). By including the dynamics of language competition and the utilization of on-the-air sounds, the film elucidates the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries and the escalation of tensions.

Animistic soundscape and nondiegetic sounds

"Set in 1987, this is a story about humans in relation to *borders* and *shamanism*, which unfolds at the foot of Mount Keriang in Kedah (emphasis added)." As stated in the opening text, the film explores how individuals co-live with the boundaries within the human world, as well as the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds. It seeks to unravel the tensions inherent within these boundaries, particularly within the human domain, while also examining the possibility of coexistence among diverse beliefs.

In terms of "borders", the story is set in Kedah, a state close to the Thai-Malaysian border. The film begins with Wayang Kulit Gedek, Kedah's shadow puppetry blending Thai and Malay folklore and languages. It unveils the state's century-long connection with Thailand. Furthermore, the film's sound design ingeniously plays with the notion of transcending geographical boundaries. During a scene where Yan's sons are watching television, the channel

abruptly shifts to a Thai adult program, accompanied by the sound effect of disrupted reception. This sudden auditory transition from a solemn Malay patriotic advertisement to the seductive dialogues of a Thai soap opera creates an ironic disruption to the state narrative, blurring the symbolic border that represents the centrifugal forces within the state.

Regarding "shamanism," the boundaries between the human and spiritual worlds, the film illustrates how these worlds intertwine through religious rituals and music. While Wayang Kulit Gedek serves as entertainment for humans, it remains inseparable from religious ceremonies. Featuring different repertoires and lyrics, the performances express gratitude to various deities, facilitating funerary rites, and exorcise evil spirits. The film's opening scene depicts spectators witnessing a shadow play performance on a white cloth, evoking a sense of shared participation in the ceremony. The shadow play is accompanied by music and vocals as prayer to the local deity Nenek Keriang for safe passage. Apart from providing historical context of Kedah, this ritualistic performance serves multiple purposes: firstly, establishing an ethereal atmosphere; secondly, serving as a portal for spectators to embark on a spiritual journey through with the blessing of Nenek Keriang; and thirdly, introducing the sounds of the shadow play which become recurring musical motifs bridging the gap between the human and spiritual realms. Through the repeated appearance of these musical motifs – vocals, comprising drums, knobbed gongs, gong chimes, cymbals, and woodwind instruments – the film not only employs them as sound effects but also as conduits connecting the human and spiritual dimensions.

Derived from the musical instruments of shadow play, the sounds of gong chimes, xiao (Chinese end-blown flute), and flute are categorized as sound effects, falling within the domain of non-diegetic sounds. Non-diegetic sounds refer to those that do not exist within the world of the film, unheard and unnoticed by any characters, yet perceptible to spectators. These sound effects serve to mark Cheong's mysterious illness from its inception to uncanny unfolding. Subsequently, we come to understand that they signal the onset of Cheong's curse. These sound effects recur at pivotal junctures related to Cheong's disease. For instance, when Yan tries to start the van engine to dispose of the cursed artifacts attached by the evil spirit, we simultaneously hear the sounds of falling objects (diegetic sound) and a flurry of rapid, high-pitched flute notes (non-diegetic sound), signaling the evil spirit has been captured and transited.

In the subsequent scene, the flute persists as the evil spirit climbs atop the van. Ultimately, as Yan throws the cursed artifacts into the sea, accompanied once more by the resonances of gong and xiao which signify the end of the curse.

Apart from sound effects, the film blurs the demarcation between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, mirroring the porous boundaries between the human and spiritual worlds. Accordingly, an animistic soundscape is created in the film, along with the local soundscape of Kedah that is filled with insect buzzes, birds chirping and human voices.

The first example arises with the apparition of Semangat Padi, the deity of paddy fields worshiped by Malay and Thai farmers. In a midnight scene, Semangat Padi shows up in his small wooden temple, looking for sacrificial offerings. Meanwhile, the ambient sounds fade out, replaced by a Malay repertoire reminiscent of the shadow play featured in the opening scene. Subsequently, Semangat Padi traverses the paddy fields with a fusion of animalistic and contemporary dance movements. The choreography is dynamic and wild, as if the deity is assimilating the paddy fields into his being, merging with nature itself. Here, the origin of the sounds confuses the audience: are they non-diegetic, or diegetic that emanates from offscreen? Initially, the melodic voice and music appear to be the former, serving as background accompaniment. However, as Semangat Padi's movements resonate with the sounds, one begins to question whether the sounds belong to the film's reality and are perceptible to the dancing deity. Consequently, the boundary of the film's narrative becomes hazy, while the realms of human and non-human intertwine within this scene. Strangely enough, with its enigmatic yet lyrical sounds and verses, the unsettling presence of Semangat Padi, the exquisitely choreographed performance, and the ambiance of the paddy fields with gentle breezes, these auditory and visual elements join to convey a sense of the sacred. Such sacredness seamlessly blends into everyday life, as the locals frequently reference the deity in their conversations. The deity is an integral part of this film world, just like the paddy fields, water and wind (Gutman, "A Story from the South").

The second example illustrates a connection between the living and the dead, depicted through a reunion scene enveloped in sound. Nam, Cheong's neighbor, tragically died in a traffic

accident following their argument. His mother engaged in the funeral's shadow play with a musical ensemble, seeking to guide the deceased to return home and reincarnate. In the same night, as the grieving mother is mourning, a subtle disturbance stirred her senses and prompted her to leave the house. Then we can hear a soft weeping vocal in the background, accompanied by the knobbed gong, which blurs the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic. Guided by these spectral sounds, she returned to the site of Nam's accident, where the toll of the knobbed gongs converged with funereal chants. There, she saw a headless corpse that is believed to be the deceased son. As the gong stops, her anguished cries intertwined with the corpse weeping, ending in a surreal yet profoundly sorrowful reunion. The apparition is waiting quietly for his mother to take him home. Here, the soundscape transcends its role as mere sound effects, serving as a medium that unites the realms of the human and non-human worlds.

Through these auditory examples, "The Story of Southern Islet" unveils an animistic worldview deeply woven into everyday life in Kedah. Unlike superficial gimmicks common in horror cinema, animism here serves as a foundational belief. It makes real the permeability of human and non-human worlds, including animals, nature, plants, and spirits, as they are endowed with subjectivity (Descola 79). Rather than privileging sights, in accordance with the presumption of human centrality, the animistic narratives of the film widen spectatorial perception through sounds (Ingawanij 107). "The Story of Southern Islet" thus shakes off ethnic politics and subjectivity of the human world with the animistic soundscape. It redefines the meaning of "multiple sounds" – which is more than verbal communication, but also the sounds of the community, nature, and anima. So as to say, the film sounds deterritorialize the boundaries between human and non-human worlds, reconnecting them under the animistic soundscape.

Central to the film's animistic narrative is the transformative journey of Yan, the heroine who grapples with and reconciles with boundaries to the spiritual world. Initially resistant to notions of superstition, Yan's rational disposition is tested when confronted with her husband's mysterious disease. Forced to confront her beliefs and prejudices, Yan embarks on a spiritual odyssey, ultimately finding reconciliation in the animistic worldview she once doubted. Led by the film sounds, the spectators follow the journey and discovers with Yan this new reality. Through her transformation, the film shows the possibility for coexistence and reconciliation

based on acceptance and respect – a poignant reminder of the humbleness in face of the animistic world.

Folktale, Nanguan and diaspora

While sounds serve as a deterritorializing force that dissolves boundaries, how do they interplay with the identity of Malaysian Chinese? As a third-generation Malaysian Chinese, Chong's feature debut is "dedicated to parents at the border," including the ancestors who traversed borders and forged new homes in foreign lands. Central to this narrative is the embodiment of ancestral ties through Nenek Keriang (literally Grandma Keriang), a folklore character from Chong's collection of oral traditions that binds the Malaysian Chinese to their roots in China. If Yan's spiritual journey represents the possibility of reconciliation, Nenek Keriang's never-to-return story marks the localization of diasporic Chinese in Malaysia.

When Yan seeks solace for her husband's health, she ventures into the cave of Mount Keriang, the iconic mountain in Kedah. There she encounters the spectral voice of Nenek Keriang. Through her ethereal and echoed words, the tale of Nenek Keriang unfolds – that of a princess from Quanzhou, China, cursed by a shaman and shipwrecked upon the shores of Kedah. As her spirit forever trapped within the ship that later became a mountain, she transformed into its guardian deity, worshiped by the locals.

In Chong's cinematic rendition, Nenek Keriang carries the plight of diasporic Chinese, forever barred from returning to their ancestral homeland, condemned to wander foreign shores indefinitely. As she helps Yan in dispelling the evil spirit, she sighs. "Later you can go home. But for me, I can never cross the boundary and return to mine." Her lament echoes through the sea breeze, expressing a profound yearning for a home she can never reclaim. Her melancholic rendition of "Leaving the Han Frontier Gate," a Nanguan melody steeped in the culture of southern China, expresses her disconsolate sorrow to the eternal exile. The lament also mirrors her to the ancient historical figure Lady Zhaojun, who was married overseas to cement political relations. Through the medium of film, the folklore character Keriang is given with a voice, her narrative woven into the fabric of animistic storytelling.

The discussion about the Chinese diaspora elicits divergent perspectives among scholars. While some define diasporic Chinese as excluding those settled in their adopted lands with no intent of return, Taiwan-based scholar Tee Kim-tong disagrees. Tee argues that the subsequent generations of Malaysian Chinese, bound by ancestral ties, are inherently diasporic Chinese (Hee 2018, 180). This perspective, however, sparks further debates as it risks perpetuating narratives of "Malaysian Chinese as foreigners" that fuel political tensions and justify bumiputera privileges. Scholars propose an alternative approach of "claiming Malaysia", urging Malaysian Chinese to assert their locally-rooted identities as a counterbalance (186).

The film title "The Story of Southern Islet" is oriented from the narrative perspective of Nenek Keriang, a diasporic Chinese whose tale unfolds in the foreign Kedah, situated to the south of her homeland. Despite feeling displaced and yearning for her native land, Kedah gradually transforms into Keriang's adopted home. She assimilates into her new identity as a local deity with a sense of resignation, while becoming the legendary progenitor of locally born Chinese. This transition is visually depicted through costume design, notably in the final scene where Keriang wears the Baju Kurung Kedah and sarong. They are traditional Malay attire in Kedah's style provided by her followers, who offer Malay-style tributes like sarong, fragrance powder, betel nut leaves despite her Chinese origins. Furthermore, the film employs sound design to illustrate Keriang's localization. Following her conversation with Yan in the mountain cave, Keriang chants a Nanguan repertoire. Her melodic voice reverberates alongside the Islamic call to prayer from a nearby mosque. This fusion of cultural sounds symbolizes the harmonious blending of Chinese and Malaysian influences.

Therefore, Nenek Keriang represents the oscillation between "Chineseness" and "foreignness." While she maintains her linguistic and emotional ties to her homeland, her adoption of Malay attire and collaborative vocal performances signify her integration into the local community. Keriang's folktale and singing voice embody the essence of "huayifeng," David Wang's interpretation of the Sinophone as fluid and dynamic oscillation between "Chineseness" and "foreignness."[24] This nuanced portrayal suggests that diasporic and localized identities can coexist, undergoing continual transformation rather than outright displacement. As

[24] For definition of "huayifeng," please refer to the introduction of this thesis (page no.).

Stuart Hall suggests, identity is a "never complete, always in process," perpetually evolving construct, shaped within the realm of representation rather than existing independently (257). "The Story of Southern Islet" thus transcends the ethnic boundaries and explores the complexities inherent in the negotiation of cultural belonging.

A conversation with Malaysian national cinema

After receiving accolades at the Golden Horse Awards, "The Story of Southern Islet" was designated as the closing film of the Malaysia International Film Festival, marking a significant triumph for Sinophone Malaysian cinema in garnering official recognition domestically. However, Chong swiftly encountered a challenge when notified by the Film Censorship Board of twelve required cuts to the film, due to sensitive depictions of religious rituals in the shadow plays (Mokhtar, "An 'Uncensored' Film"). In response, Chong explained the underlying intentions of his film to both the Board and local media. He underscored that the film's objective was not to advocate supernatural beliefs or oppose the state religion, but rather to safeguard the cultural legacy of Kedah intertwined with his own childhood memories. Particularly, he highlighted the significance of Wayang Kulit Gedet in the film, a distinctive form of shadow play in Malaysia that captivated international audiences. He fought for the preservation of scenes and sounds integral to the film, which were crucial for safeguarding a thousand-year-old yet dwindling performing art. After back-and-forth conversations, Chong's patience and efforts paid off, with no cuts ultimately required, though it was not a complete success – a one-minute segment featuring Malay curses during the shadow play was muted, with the subtitles concealed (Chen "Spirits, Authority, Human World").

Indeed, the challenge faced by "The Story of Southern Islet" is not uncommon in Malaysia, as the country is notorious for its stringent censorship policies. Film censorship manifests the state's power of repression and "no-saying," with themes such as racial dominion, diplomatically sensitive subjects, disrespect of religion, and glorification of communism traditionally banned in Malaysian cinemas, suppressed, or beyond discussion (Kuhn 2; Lee 2022, 34). Consequently, Malaysian filmmakers often resort to self-censorship or employ irony and satire to criticize state policies (Khoo 2006, 111-2). Nonetheless, the resolution achieved for

"The Story of Southern Islet" was relatively mild, secured through the filmmaker's efforts and dialogues with the Film Censorship Board. Chong emphasized the importance of communication in fostering harmony amidst diversity:

> "There are more than seventy ethnic groups in East and West Malaysia. There are diverse ideologies, religious convictions, and value systems. [...] In Malaysia, the moment a confrontational stance is adopted, all possibilities diminish. Therefore, dialogue is important. If I want to establish a foothold here, I must be willing to engage in dialogue when challenges arise. [...] Otherwise, the channels of communication will be shut. Or in the worst circumstances, it may even escalate to bloodshed." (Chang, "Lowering oneself")

Chong recognized that neither state censorship nor the long-standing tensions between Malay-Chinese relations could be swiftly dispelled. Instead, he sought communication and adopted a "sliding position" to cope with these issues rather than directly confront them. This approach resonates with the essence of "The Story of Southern Islet," which deterritorializes geographical and ethnic boundaries through on-the-air sounds and its animistic soundscape. It subtly touches on sensitive themes such as ethnic dominion, enforced nationalism, and the Operasi Lalang crackdown. Moreover, it scrutinizes and reflects on the Speak Mandarin Movement and the imposed unity within the Chinese community. Furthermore, the film's animistic perspective makes the filmmaker humble as Chong remarked, "only then can I try to temper my narrative with gentleness," said Chong (Chang, "Lowering oneself"). Consequently, the film's critique remains gentle and multidimensional, akin to Shih Shu-mei's advocacy of the Sinophone.

While identifying himself as "anak Kedah" (literally son of Kedah), a native Malaysian, Chong does not shy away from his ancestral roots in China (Mokhtar, "An 'uncensored' film").[25] "The Story of Southern Islet" can be regarded as Chong's own journey to contemplate the relationship between self, family, and homeland, a quest for internal connection. Through

[25] Apart from multiple sounds, Chong is highly conscious of the Southeast Asian aesthetics that distinct his work from films of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and more. The warm, sunny, tropical color tone, as well as the historical backgrounds of Southeast Asia, contribute to the differences (Seah "In spite of oneself").

characters like Yan and Nenek Keriang, Chong delves into the complexities of diaspora and localization, affirming his Chinese heritage. Simultaneously, by incorporating oral traditions into the film's soundscape – such as folk tales, Nanguan, and Wayang Kulit Gedek – Chong expands and enriches the notion of "multiple sounds," showcasing the fluid exchange between Chinese and Malay cultures. The animistic soundscape further enhances our understanding of "multiple sounds," highlighting the plurality of Malaysian Chinese identity and distinctiveness of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

Chapter 3

Voices of the Silent and Diasporic – Lau Kek-huat's "Absent Without Leave" and "Boluomi"

> *Will I lose hope in Malaysia? No. She just needs to go through the process, and I want to have a dialogue with her; that's why I came back. If I return as a nobody, I can only be part of the society who is expected to be obedient; but if I am strong enough, […] I can choose to be myself. When you can be yourself, you realize that there are more than one places you can go.*
> – Tsai Ming-liang (Seah, "All About Freedoms")

The Sinophone, as emphasized by Shih Shu-mei, is the cultural and political practice of "anti-diaspora." According to Shih, the concept of diaspora implies loyalty to and longing for the ancestral "home/root" which forcefully ties the diasporic individuals to their so-called homeland (2011, 713). Thus, she states that anti-diaspora is a relief to diasporic individuals that "diaspora has an end date" since "everyone should be given a chance to be local" (Shih 2007, 185). Applying this notion to actual practice, Shih underscores the multiplicity of Sinitic languages which undergo localization and creolization in relation to the other linguistic influences. Central to her concept is that the Sinophone is "a transitional moment" of "a community of change": as diasporic Chinese communities opt for settlement in host countries, they eventually culminate in native status for subsequent generations (Shih 2010, 45). When these later generations embrace local languages to articulate their localized concerns, the Sinophone paradigm may decline, or conceivably disappear (39). Thus, one's linguistic choices intricately intertwine with their identity and diasporic stance.

However, such a framework may not neatly apply to Malaysian Chinese, especially the third and subsequent generations. The imposition of pro-Malay policies in the 1970s engendered a profound sense of "unbelonging" among those born and bred in Malaysia with citizenship. Coupled with political turbulence, it spurred significant outward migration of Malaysian

Chinese, particularly in the 1980s (Kang 2015, 37-9).[26] Consequently, it is questionable whether the diasporic trajectory of Malaysian Chinese, as suggested by Shih, will indeed reach its terminus.

For Malaysian Chinese filmmakers, facing stringent censorship and resource constraints has compelled many to seek opportunities abroad for funding and market access. Noteworthy figures like Tsai Ming-liang, Lau Kek-huat, and Ho Wi-ding have resided in countries/regions like China and Taiwan, where greater resources and creative latitude abound. Nonetheless, some of the filmmakers travel between overseas and home soil, endeavoring to foster dialogue and artistic expression within their native context.

"What does it take to be a real Malaysian?" asked Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Lau Kek-huat in his documentary "Absent Without Leave" (2016). Born and raised in Malaysia, Lau's journey has taken him through Singapore for work, and to Taiwan for study and residence. In his documentary, Lau explores his family history, uncovering the surprising revelation that his grandfather was a member of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), branded a "terrorist" in history textbooks. Through intimate interviews and oral histories of MCP members, Lau transformed these narratives into his debut feature "Boluomi" (2019), continuing his contemplation of identity and intergenerational trauma.

Through close reading of Lau's two films, this chapter aims to explore several questions. Firstly, to what extent can individuals' language/speech challenge that national narrative on history and identity? Secondly, how does the formation and self-definition of Malaysian identity evolve within the context of globalization and transnationalism, as reflected in language and speech? Thirdly, how does the practice of filmmaking extend and enrich existing theories? To tackle these questions, the chapter first draws on Hamaid Naficy's notion of accented cinema, which offers insights for the close readings of Lau's films. I argue that his films represent a circuitous journey of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, where the filmmaker oscillates

[26] Between 1957 and 1991, Malaysia experienced a natural increase of 3.38 million people in its Chinese population. However, during this timeframe, there was also a net migration of 1.1 million Chinese individuals. It has been highlighted that the outflux of Chinese immigrants was exceptionally noticeable during the 1980s, with around half of the growing Chinese population opting to leave Malaysia at that time (Kang 2015, 37).

between diaspora and anti-diaspora, reshaping his own identity. Lastly, the chapter explores the entanglement between Lau's films and national cinema, highlighting the critical potential of Sinophone accented cinema (Suner 363).

Accented cinema and Lau's films

The concept of "accented cinema," developed by Naficy, refers to a genre of exilic/diasporic cinema that "cuts across previously defined geographic, national, cultural, cinematic and metacinematic boundaries (1996, 119)". Accented cinema primarily addresses works created by filmmakers who are exiles, diasporic individuals, refugees, or immigrants with cross-border experiences from post-colonial and Third World countries to the West since the 1960s (Naficy 2018, 10). The theme of accented cinema revolves around journeys of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the quest for home, homelessness, or homecoming. It ultimately depicts the protagonists' search for their identity and how they express this identity (33). Naficy's idea extends authorship theory by viewing accented films as heavily influenced by the directors' personal histories, showcasing their unique stylistic touches on expressions of exile/diaspora. According to him, discussions on authorship in exile/diaspora must consider their dislocation as interstitial subjects within social contexts and cinematic practices (10). Consequently, accented films are constantly in a multilateral dialogue between their home and host societies, their respective national cinemas, and audiences (12).

In terms of production mode, accented cinema represents a reworking of "independent transnational cinema", that includes low-budget, imperfect, amateurish production (Naficy 1996, 119). Accented filmmakers usually invest in their own films, raise funds and put up with budget constraints. For that reason, they often perform multiple roles in their films and have a small crew to gain full control over authorship, distribution and exhibition.

Other than home-related thematic preoccupations and production mode, which are similar to diaspora cinema and independent transnational cinema respectively, accented cinema has a specifically strong focus on the language/speech. Accented films include employment of self-reflexive and inscriptive voiceover, asynchronous sound, multilinguality, accented speech and

epistolarity (Naficy 2018, 37). These sonic elements, or called "accented style", are potentially disruptive cinematic strategies which are "counterhegemonic insofar as many of them de-emphasize synchronous sound, [...] create a slippage between voice and speaker" (24). They oppose the homogeneity of official, standardized accents and dominant cinema while foregrounding the multi-accented, multilingual, and multivocal.

Lau's two films embody the essence of "accented cinema" through their thematic elements, production mode, and accented style. As a diasporic filmmaker with transnational experiences, Lau infuses his works with a unique perspective. His films' accented style serves as a disruptive force, challenging the hegemony of dominant cinema. In Malaysia, its dominant cinema, termed as "Malay(sian) patriotic films" by scholars, is characterized by substantial state investment, reinforcement of state narratives, and oversimplified representations of Malay nationalism (Lim 101).

Lau's accented style, however, presents a counter-narrative, embracing a bottom-up approach with a diverse array of accents, languages, epistolarity and asynchronous sound. I argue that this sonic disruption not only challenges the Malaysian dominant cinema but also redefines notions of "Malaysian" identity. Drawing from Yiman Wang's perspective, Lau's approach can be interpreted as an active "homing" strategy, reshaping the understanding of belonging and identity in the diaspora. In this dynamic process, the relationship with one's homeland is "never a static past to be related to vertically […] but rather the ever-present that is constantly changing" (Wang 2012, 543-4). Lau's films navigate the complexity of language and accent, offering a nuanced portrayal of diversity that dissolves rigid state-imposed identities. Through subtle subversion, Lau's accented style empowers individuals to transcend top-down frameworks, fostering a more inclusive and fluid conception of identity.

Furthermore, Lau's films exemplify an "écart" (divergence) between diaspora and anti-diaspora. As scholar Hee Wai-siam proposes, Sinophone Malaysian accented cinema reveals a nuanced "écart", distinguishing it from Naficy's diaspora-focused accented cinema and Shih's

anti-diaspora-centered Sinophone study (Hee 2018, 258).[27] Hee underscores that Malaysian Chinese diaspora discourse is not solely anti-localization, nor is anti-diaspora discourse essentially nationalistic or hopeful toward the state (263). He argues that the binary frameworks of Naficy and Shih fail to encapsulate the fluidity of Malaysian Chinese filmmakers who traverse borders for their filmmaking, engaging in transnational circuits of production and distribution. Instead, the oscillation between leaving and returning, characterized by a sense of "absent without leave," fosters negotiation rather than rigid dichotomies and shapes the unique accented style of Sinophone Malaysian cinema (258).

The silence and state narrative

Before exploring Lau's accented style, it is essential to examine the silence in his films. The beginning of "Absent Without Leave" is rooted in a prolonged silence between Lau and his father. Revealed through Lau's voiceover, their nine-year estrangement underscores a lifelong absence of paternal affection. Lau intended to reflect on his upbringing and this emotional void so he embarked on a journey to unravel its origins, leading him back to his hometown.

There, Lau delves into his family's history in search of the elusive "absent father." What he unearths is a legacy of silence and suppressed intergenerational trauma. Discovering that his grandfather, a first-generation immigrant, was a member of the MCP, Lau confronts a history veiled in secrecy and fear. His grandfather's violent death, sanctioned by anti-communist forces in the 1950s, cast a long shadow over subsequent generations. In an era of political persecution, acknowledging familial ties to the MCP posed serious dangers. Silence became a coping mechanism, shielding the family from suspicion and safeguarding their survival. The weight of this silence, steeped in fear and trauma, permeates Lau's family, underscoring the enduring intergenerational impact.

[27] This concept of "écart" was derived from French philosopher and Sinologist François Jullien. Unlike Gilles Deleuze's concept of "difference," which suggests distinction, "écart" implies distance and generates tension. It evokes a sense of distance that stimulates critical reflection, opening up a space of reflexivity and cultural diversity. (Wu 2020, 33-4)

Even today, members of the MCP are consistently depicted as "terrorists" within the official narrative, a label that has dehumanized them over time. This narrative is a controlled by the British colonial ruler, perpetuated by the post-independent government. In the 1950s, the British colonial government utilized the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) to produce a series of films and documentaries that dominated the cinematic landscape of the era. In these MFU films, all MCP members were Chinese, stereotyped and "portrayed as being completely unreasonable, violent and brutal" (Hee 2018, 108). They were always referred to as "bandits" or "communist terrorists" responsible for attacks on trains and public facilities. While the colonial power operated behind the scenes, the MFU productions consistently demonize, racialise, and downplay the MCP's role in the anti-Japanese occupation and anti-colonial struggle for independence (Khoo 2010, 249). [28] Nearly all early MFU films featured a narrator who provided a voice-over commentary, utilizing binary opposition to shape perspectives. This one-way communication technique served to "coat the pill of propaganda" and promoted the policies of the colonial government (Hassan 184-5).

The silence regarding MCP is twofold: firstly, it is the result of fear instilled within families as intergenerational trauma – when trauma remains unspoken, unacknowledged, and unclaimed, it often manifests as violence towards oneself and others. Secondly, it is the result of the singular voice propagated by the state narrative. Lau's films challenged this silence through his carefully crafted accented style.

Breaking the silence

Before giving back a voice to the silenced MCP members and traumatized Malaysians, Lau carved out a space for alternative storytelling through the medium of film sound. In the beginning of the documentary, he included the Indonesian traditional folk melody "Terang Bulan" (literally moonlight), which was derived from the renowned French composition "La

[28] During the World War II, as the British forces withdrew, they engaged the MCP to establish the "Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army" to fight against the Japanese invasion. However, following the British restoration of control over Malaya and Singapore, the MCP, which had shifted its focus to opposing British colonial rule, was outlawed as an illegal organization. Later, the British colonial administration declared a state of emergency which lasted from 1949 to 1960.

Rosalie" and later adapted into Malaysia's national anthem in 1957. Commencement with this song symbolizes a departure from state narrative and legitimacy, while simultaneously reclaiming the space once monopolized by the national anthem, a representation of state authority. Throughout the documentary, "Terang Bulan" resurfaced repeatedly, evolving into the musical motif of the film. Alternative renditions such as "Mamula Moon" was featured in the end credits to underscore the fluidity of symbolic representations. To the Malaysian audience who are familiar with the national anthem, these repeated sounds function to urge them rethinking the constructed nature of national history.

Moreover, the folk melody's lyrical tone evokes a sense of comfort and nostalgia, akin to the familiar embrace of home. This sentiment aligns with Lau's sporadic direct address to his grandfather ("Grandpa, are you a terrorist?"), infusing the documentary with an epistolary quality, as if it were a letter to one's home. These sonic elements, as part of the accented style, destabilizes the grip of state authority while simultaneously echoing Lau's yearning for a sense of belonging and his homecoming journey.

Filming one's family members is a longstanding trope in documentary filmmaking, providing a space for conversations that break the repressed silence within families. Yet, surfacing these deeply rooted traumas and emotions takes time. The question, "How does it feel not having a father?" apparently unsettled Lau's father before the camera. It is a question he likely never contemplated during his upbringing amidst the Malayan Emergency. Following a prolonged pause and hesitation, unable to articulate his feelings, he simply shrugged and replied, "Just not having a father." The director captures these pauses and silences with sensitivity, allowing the audience to witness the weight of unspoken pain and the complexities of intergenerational trauma.

In the documentary's opening, Lau interviewed his parents and extended to family members, to unravel the concealed family history. Their conversations were conducted in Fuzhounese and accented Mandarin respectively. Like scattered puzzle pieces, their memories about the grandfather sometimes appeared contradictory, yet together they gradually formed a

more complete picture: an irresponsible husband who devoted to the MCP, and a caring father who secretly returned home to give his children a shower.

A noticeable contrast emerged between Lau's father's accented Mandarin, reflecting his Fuzhounese roots, and Lau's Taiwanese Mandarin heard in his first-person voiceover. The varied accents among Malaysian Chinese across generations reflect their distinct backgrounds and the pervasive influence of transnational experiences. While Lau's father hailed from Sitiawan, a state predominantly populated by Fuzhounese migrants, Lau himself was born in Johor Bahru, the southern tip of Malay Peninsula, heavily influenced by its proximity to Singapore. After completing university education in Singapore and working there as a Chinese-language teacher, Lau pursued film studies in Taiwan, where he now resides. His accent transformation mirrored his transnational journey, diverging from his parents' linguistic roots. However, during Lau's interview with his mother conducted in Fuzhounese, his speech slowed down and punctuated by hesitations, revealing his grasp of the language.[29] These language dynamics encapsulate the heightened mobility characterizing later generations of immigrants like Lau. As their diasporic journey continues to unfold, their language and speech patterns will constantly evolve.

Expanding beyond his family, Lau sought traces of his grandfather among former MCP members, introducing diverse accents in the documentary's latter half. He traveled to Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Thailand, where exiled MCP members recounted their experiences in accented Mandarin. Their stories, previously overlooked and marginalized, shed light on their involvement in anti-Japanese resistance and post-war struggles for Malayan independence, culminating in homelessness after the MCP disbanded in 1989. Until Lau's documentary, many of these narratives remained untold, dismissed as worthless or even stigmatized as "terrorist" activities. Some MCP members faced resentment from their own children for their past involvement. Lau's exploration not only reveals his hidden family histories but also amplifies the voices of dehumanized MCP members whose stories have been shadowed by the state narrative.

[29] In an interview, Lau shared his initial struggle to understand the Fuzhounese pronunciation of "communism" when it was first mentioned by his parents (Tung "Lau Kek-huat").

The interviewees include not only Chinese, but also Malays, as shown in the annual reunion of MCP comrades in Betong, a village situated in southern Thailand near the Malaysian border. They greeted each other in Malay while introducing themselves to the camera in Mandarin. The multilingual and multicultural portrayal breaks the official monistic narrative and racial stereotypes. As depicted in MFU films, the MCP was a Chinese-only political movement with other ethnicities as its victims. Malays who joined the MCP were insinuated as heretics, deemed "not true Malays" for abandoning Islam (Hee 2019, 107). Both the historical Malay voices and multi-ethnic characteristics of the MCP were absent from MFU productions. In "Absent Without Leave," the Malay MCP members finally have the opportunity to voice out their aspirations for an independent Malaya.

The dream of independence shared among MCP members of different races was expressed through multiple languages and accents. Lau cleverly connects these accented styles with visual imagery to underscore the unity among members. During the reunion, MCP members and their descendants joyfully dance together in a circle, transcending age, gender, and ethnicity. The dancing scene, featuring the upper halves of elderly MCP members, seamlessly transitions to MCP's black-and-white footage showcasing their dancing feet. This juxtaposition, coupled with the multilingual dialogue, symbolically stitches together the torn pieces of Malaysia's chaotic past (Hee 2018, 262). It highlights a moment in history where ethnic harmony flourished. However, it was short-lived, stifled by colonial rule and replaced with divisive ethnic stereotypes. The British government's policy of divide-and-rule entrenched ethnic differentiation in Malaysia, providing a political tool for subsequent Malaysian authority.

After deterritorializing the dominant cinema and state narrative through his accented style, Lau's voiceover asked the following questions: **"**Those who sacrificed their lives could not become Malaysians; those who fought peacefully could not become Malaysians; even when they fought until death, they were not yet a Malaysian. What does it take to be a real Malaysian?" With this inquiry, Lau delves deeper into the exploration of identity in his feature debut "Boloumi." Drawing from his own experiences, Lau suggests that the journey of self-identity often begins within one's diaspora.

The multiplicity and fluidity of language

In “Boluomi,” we can see how Lau transformed the oral histories in “Absent Without Leave” to illustrate the diaspora of Malaysian Chinese. Building on this structure, he further sought to explore the renewed diaspora of the third or later generations of Malaysian Chinese, a group that includes himself.

“Boluomi” is interspersed with two parallel storylines which appear unrelated. The first storyline unfolds in Malaya of the 1950s when the MCP was fighting a guerrilla war in the jungle against British colonial rule. The boy, Mi, is the protagonist of this storyline. When he was a newborn baby, he was sent away from his MCP mother out of the jungle for survival. A few years later, his biological mother reclaimed the boy, so young Mi had to face identity issues early on and readapt to a new life in the Chinese New Village.[30] The language of this storyline consists of Malay, Foochow, Cantonese, and English, yet the characters were mostly silent and cautious in the New Village, essentially a detention camp.

Another storyline takes place in present-day Taiwan. It tells the story of Yifan, a Malaysian Chinese young man in his early twenties, who came to Taiwan to study. During his confused and restless diaspora, he met Laila, an illegal migrant worker from the Philippines, and fell in love with her. But in the end, they inevitably had to separate. The protagonist was partially based on Lau’s personal experiences: eager to leave the home country, emotionally distant from his father and home country, and had high hopes of studying in Taiwan.

A flashback explained Yifan’s background: he failed to secure a university offer despite his academic results, as Malaysian public universities provide guaranteed quotas and priority admissions for Malays, but not Chinese. Many Malaysian Chinese students, like Yifan, can only study abroad after graduating from high school, with Taiwan being their first choice. As a locally

[30] Chinese New Villages in Malaya were established by the British colonial administration as detention facilities. Implemented in 1950, the New Villages initially aimed to cut off resources and backing for the MCP, particularly among the ethnic Chinese populace. Nearly a quarter of Malayan Chinese residents were relocated to the New Villages. The New Villages were fenced and curfewed, surrounded by watchtowers and guards to prevent escape, unauthorized entry, or transportation of food outside the village (Strauch 126).

born citizen, Yifan seemed to have become a second-class citizen abandoned by the country. When he disappointingly returned home, he soon had a confrontation with his gambling father. Yifan's rage mounted, and he cut off his father's finger with a knife, symbolically marking his disrupted connection with both home and Malaysia. Yifan's departure to Taiwan was not only to escape his incompetent father but also to leave an unloving country. While "cutting off fingers" in Arabic means "exile," Yifan chose self-exile, becoming the prodigal son and a diasporic Malaysian (Chang "Elegance in Sorrow").

As Yifan drifted to Taiwan, he sought every opportunity to graft there and take root again. When he worked to distribute restaurant flyers on the street and greeted passers-by, he shifted between different languages to attract customers. Whenever he met a Malaysian, he identified himself as Malaysian, and when encountering a Hong Konger, he claimed Hong Kong origins in Cantonese. Like many Malaysian Chinese, Yifan is multilingual; he learned Malay and Mandarin in school, while inheriting Hokkien and Cantonese from his parents. Multilinguality and his performance of accents here became survival tools appealing to people's familiarity. However, behind Yifan's "flexible" identity lies his rootlessness and his eagerness to settle in Taiwan. As a foreigner, he could only rely on himself, with nobody else to depend on. To earn enough money to extend his stay, Yifan staged an accident to claim insurance compensation: he intentionally injured his finger with a mutton slicing machine. Here, the broken and reattached finger mirrors the Malaysian plant he tried to transplant in Taiwan, symbolizing his quest for a new home overseas.

During Yifan's recovery, his encounter with Laila expanded the narrative of the story and transcended linguistic boundaries beyond the Sinophone world. Laila, employed as a cleaning lady in a massage parlor, is joined by other female workers from Vietnam, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries. While their primary means of communication is a creolized Mandarin, often including English vocabulary, they transition to their native languages when singing or speaking with their families, including Vietnamese, Indonesian Malay, and Tagalog. This linguistic mosaic mirrors the burgeoning migrant workforce in Taiwan.[31]

[31] By the end 2023, the number of Southeast Asian migrant workers in Taiwan had exceeded 753,430. While Taiwan's total population is 23 million, meaning roughly one in every 32 people there is a Southeast Asian migrant

Echoing the ethos of "giving voice to the voiceless" in "Absent Without Leave", Lau amplifies the creolized languages and diasporic stories of migrant workers within the feature film, recognizing it as unnatural to exclude them. It touched upon pressing social issues such as sham marriages, gender-based marginalization, objectification and the invisibility of foreign laborers. The multilingual and multi-accented tapestry thus becomes a metaphor for diverse forms of diaspora, particularly deterritorialized diaspora, which signifies a new form of dislocation under the paradigm of transnationalism (Cohen 102-3). Through this accented style and narrative choice, Lau broadens his thematic scope beyond the confines of Malaysian Chinese identity and diaspora, to encompass the shared experiences of Southeast Asians. Together, they weave a collective portrait of diasporic wanderers spanning vast expanses of time and space. Lau thus strategically redefines notions of diaspora, prompting introspection on questions of belonging and identity.

Despite variations in their language proficiency, Yifan and Laila communicated with a blend of Mandarin and English, body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures. Their understanding transcends mere words, bridged by their shared diasporic experiences and the commonalities of Southeast Asian cultures. Although Malay and Tagalog (Laila's native tongue) are not mutually intelligible, they boast numerous cognates under the Austronesian language family. When Yifan taught Laila Mandarin, the disparities in Malay and Mandarin pronunciation were evident, particularly with words like "stone," "moon" and "wind," Yet, when Yifan utters "boloumi" (jackfruit), Laila grasps its meaning effortlessly. This vignette, crafted by Lau, once more illustrates the fluidity and openness of languages, and interconnectedness of their shared experiences.

Beyond the realm of language and uncertainty of communication

Apart from employing the accented style through language and speech, Lau delves into the realm of the unspeakable. When Yifan cracked open the jackfruit on the rooftop, Laila exclaimed, "it

worker. These workers originate from countries such as Indonesia (36%), Vietnam (35%), the Philippines (20%), and Thailand (9%), serving across various sectors including manufacturing, domestic assistance, and caregiving ("Foreign Workers in Productive Industries and Social Welfare by Nationality").

smells like home." This huge, heavy, and bumpy fruit, with its sweet aroma and flavor, evokes shared memories for Yifan and Laila as Southeast Asians. In both Malaysia and the Philippines, jackfruit is often enjoyed communally, symbolizing familial closeness. Here, it fostered the interethnic romance between Yifan and Laila.

The scent of jackfruit serves as a thread linking to another storyline in the film – Mi's story in 1950s Malaya – until then, the two storylines remained distinct and lacked any evident connection. In the film's opening, the audience first encountered baby Mi, peacefully nestled in a jackfruit, reminiscent of a womb, awaiting discovery by a passerby. As Mi grew and reunited with his biological mother, their relationship remained distant until they shared a jackfruit, marking a newfound closeness. Thus, the scent of jackfruit becomes a conduit for emotional resonance, bridging diasporas and their intimate memories spanning generations.

In addition to allowing interviewees and fictional characters to speak their own stories, Lau employs scenery shots with ambient sounds as pauses in both films. They highlight the gaps left by language and speech, and simultaneously suggest a possibility of conciliation in these silences. Reflecting on the production of the documentary, Lau reminisces, "there were moments when my father would suddenly halt, unable to find the right words" (Chang and Chiew "Taipei Film Festival"). Nevertheless, these pauses and gaps in language/speech intertwines with the potential of the Sinophone, as discussed by David Wang:

> Sinophone studies begin with the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of languages, which is undoubtedly a keen observation of the reality and imagination of life. The politics of sound/speech are ever-changing. From Hannah Arendt's exploration of "speech" and "action" to Mikhail Bakhtin's yearning for "heteroglossia," attention is drawn to the political creativity of sound. However, the greatest critical potential of the Sinophone lies in recognizing the fluidity of language and speech, reminding us of the uncertainty of communication. We must consider the discontinuity and ambiguity of sounds, the expression beyond words, as well as the hoarseness of sounds, helpless muteness, and eternal silence caused by political oppression, changes in local environment, and the passage of time. ("華夷風研究以語言的眾聲喧嘩作爲立論起

點，這當然是對生命實相和想像的生動觀察。聲音/言説的政治千變萬化。阿倫特對「言説」與「行動」的探討，巴赫金對「眾聲喧嘩」的嚮往，都著眼於聲音在政治意義上的創造性。但華夷風最大的批判能量在觀察語言、言説的流動性，以及提醒我們溝通的不確定性。我們必須顧及聲音若斷若續、語焉不詳、意在言外的表述 — 以及因爲政治壓迫、風土變遷、時間流逝而導致聲音的喑啞，無奈的沉默，和永遠死寂"; my trans. 2020, 70)

Regarding the limitation of language/speech, Lau combined these ideas with diaspora and conveyed through Yifan and Laila's short-lived romance. Although they can overcome language barriers and share similar cultural backgrounds, "we are different" as Laila concluded hesitantly in Mandarin before she left. The meaning beyond her words are: Yifan strives to seek a new home in Taiwan, whereas Laila must continue to drift and evade inspection by the Immigration Agency, and romance could not save her helpless situation. Their separation also suggests the possibility of continued displacement and rootlessness during one's home-seeking journey.

However, Lau was not completely pessimistic as he intended to draw a temporal continuity in "Boloumi" through asynchronous sounds as part of its accented style. For most of the scene transitions between the two storylines across generations, Lau adopted L-cut, a type of sound bridge which carries the sounds of a scene into the next one. Furthermore, in the end of the film, while Yifan chose to stay in Taiwan continuing his home-seeking journey, it is inserted with the non-diegetic sound of the language lesson Laila and Yifan had before ("stone, moon, wind, boluomi"), spoken in Malay and Mandarin respectively. Then, the sound of harmonica arose, which is a J-cut that the audio of the next scene precedes the shot change. It seamlessly transitioned to the next scene jumping back to the 1950s Malaya, after the boy Mi witnessed his mother's death and returned to the collapsed house. He started playing a harmonica slowly, alone in the crumbles. The boy did not cry but tried to comfort himself with his favorite musical instrument. There was an unexpected calmness in the sound of the harmonica, yet with a subtle blend of sadness and confusion towards the loss of family and childhood. Though independent in their progression and times with different levels of homelessness and home-seeking, the diasporic fates of Yifan and Mi are intrinsically connected with deterritorializing sounds. They

converge with each other to provide a richer narrative of the torn Malaysia, suggesting a possibility of conciliation and empathy across generations in the expressions beyond words.

The journey to redefine one's identity

Today's diaspora studies enable individuals to articulate and reinterpret identities within the context of globalization and transnationalism, while embracing multiple layers of identity to accommodate the diverse facets of their selves across different times and spaces (Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart 2). Through the fluidity and uncertainty of languages and communication, Yifan eventually came to terms with his hybrid identity as a "Malaysian Chinese," navigating the complexities between "Malayness" and "Chineseness" within the diaspora network alongside figures like Laila, her fellow migrant workers, and his diasporic ancestors. In other words, Yifan's identity is multi-layered, oscillating between Malaysian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, diaspora member, and more. His perspective thus underwent a profound shift as he discovered overlaps and nuances among diasporas, leading him to shed his resentment towards his father and homeland.

Lau's films, similarly, can be seen as an ongoing journey to reinterpret his identity and reconnect with his homeland, showing an écart oscillating between diaspora and anti-diaspora. Because of the subject matter on MCP, both "Absent Without Leave" and "Boluomi" were completely banned in Malaysia. To bypass the censorship, Lau released the documentary online, allowing Malaysian citizens to watch it for free. For the feature film, Lau openly responded with a five-minute trilingual video on social media, showing the 27 cuts demanded by the Film Censorship Board of Malaysia and the corresponding scenes He decided to send URL links of the film to people in Malaysia who wished to watch it. Lastly, he wrote, "they can't censor memories of people. Precious [cherish] it, whisper it and pass it on" (HummingBird Production, "27 scenes").

Just like his documentary title "Absent Without Leave" suggested, Lau consistently returned to Malaysia making documentaries while his scope of concern extends to the other minorities of Malaysia. "The Tree Remembers" (2019) tackles the origin of discriminatory race-

based policies in Malaysia and the taboo of the 1969 racial riot from the perspective of Orang Asli, an indigenous Malayan community; “Karen” (2022) follows a Malaysian teenage boy of Indian origin, exploring the racial discrimination, economic, and education inequality in Malaysia; “Between the Stars and Waves” (2022) was about the one-million stateless population that builds their home on the water of the Malaysian state of Sabah. As Lau continues to explore the marginalized communities of the country, the languages and accents in his works thus become more diverse, consistently redefining the constitution of Malaysian identity.

As Lau shared in an interview, he finally became a Malaysian during the making of “Absent Without Leave” (Liu “Returning the Story to the People”). Filmmaking is his way of reconnecting with the country. Thus, “Malaysian” is no longer an abstract idea imposed by the country, but an interconnection with the ancestors, future generation, minoritarian voices, as well as a negotiation with the majority. “Sometimes when we feel hopeless about a situation, it may be because the questions we ask are too simple. We are eager to classify complex problems using stereotypes,” said Lau. “Perhaps one day we can look at Malaysia with a more diverse perspective, then we can settle our emotions in a better way” (Chen “Golden Horse Nomination”).

Chapter 4

Languages and Mobility – Edmund Yeo's "Malu"

This chapter aims to explore the shapeshifting and limits of language and its relationship with mobility at the boundary of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema. It examines the films of Edmund Yeo, a filmmaker less frequently mentioned in neither study of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema nor Chinese-language media. This is largely because Yeo has taken an unconventional path, one that no other Malaysian Chinese filmmaker has pursued. While most independent filmmakers in the Sinophone Malaysian cinema during the 2010s targeted film festivals in China and Taiwan as primary outlets and funding sources, Yeo's career is closely tied to Japan.

Raised in Malaysia and educated in Australia for his bachelor's degree, Yeo began making films in Tokyo while earning his master's and doctoral degrees from Waseda University. His Japanese-language short film "Kingyo" (2009), an adaptation of Yasunari Kawabata's novel, earned him the distinction of being the youngest Malaysian director to compete at the Venice International Film Festival. His Chinese-language feature debut, "River of Exploding Durians" (2014), was the first Malaysian film selected for the main competition at the Tokyo International Film Festival. His second feature film, "Aqérat (We, the Dead)" (2019), which features a mix of Sinitic, Thai, and Malay languages, won him the Best Director award at Tokyo.

The reception of Yeo's films in Japan, a non-Sinophone country in East Asia, can be attributed not only to the increasing attention to Southeast Asian films and filmmakers by the film festival circuit over the past decade, but also to the themes and styles of Yeo's films. Focused on the theme of mobility and conveyed with poetic sensibility through cinematic languages, Yeo's films have become increasingly universal, appealing to film festival audiences globally. Acclaimed by film critics worldwide, Yeo demonstrates the potential of an auteur with his editing skills and the poetry-like mood and atmosphere he creates through cinematic languages. However, there has been little discussion on how linguistic elements contribute to Yeo's poetic style, and how mobility and languages are interrelated in his works. This also highlights the potential fluidity of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

This chapter aims to fill this gap through a close reading of Yeo's third feature, "Malu" (2020), a Malaysian-Japanese-French co-production. Filmed in Malaysia and Japan, the movie features dialogues in Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Japanese, and English, with a variety of accents. Inspired by Japanese writer Natsuo Kirino's crime novel "Grotesque," Yeo's "Malu" unfolds in a non-linear fashion, centering on the repeated separations of two sisters, Hong and Lan.

As children, Hong and Lan lived with their mentally unstable mother in a small fishing village in Malaysia. This instability placed a significant strain on the sisters, particularly Hong, who was responsible for taking care of Lan. After a failed suicide attempt by their mother, their grandmother took Hong to the city, raising her with middle-class values and an art education. Lan remained in the village, caring for their destructive mother. Twenty years later, Hong has become a theater producer, while Lan works as a shampoo girl in a hair salon and continues to care for their ailing mother. The sisters have lost touch. They are reunited only by their mother's death, but this reunion is marked by estrangement and hostility, leading to Lan's disappearance without a farewell. Years later, Hong receives a devastating phone call from Japan, informing her of Lan's death. This prompts Hong to embark on a journey to investigate her estranged sister's secret life, haunted by painful family memories.

Beginning with a discussion of Tim Cresswell's notions of mobility and its construction of meaning, the chapter analyzes the different forms of mobility in "Malu" and their relation to the protagonists' use of languages, tones, and accents, as well as aesthetic impact brought by oral performance of written texts. Finally, it posits that Yeo's use of language and poetic cinematic style offers an insightful reflection on the Sinophone cinema. It demonstrates the strength of Sinophone Malaysian cinema lies in its mobility and flexibility, which allows it to transcend and extend beyond the boundaries.

Mobility, meanings and language

People are constantly on the move, while migration and seasonal movement have always been integral to the human experience (Schiller and Salazar 185).[32] Other than these, mobility involves various aspects, including communication networks, transportation of goods, and automobility, which is now recognized as a fundamental concept in the human world, alongside space and place (Cresswell 2008, 136).

Mobility is pervasive that lies "at the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the microgeographies of everyday life" (Cresswell 2010, 551). It connects people, places, objects, and emotions, shaping how the world operates. Human geographer and poet Tim Cresswell perceives mobility as more than physical movement; he regards it as a social product imbued with meanings, experiences, and power dynamics (Cresswell 2006, 5). In his work "On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World," Cresswell examines how mobility is understood within social and cultural power contexts and how these perceptions shape judgments about individuals and their behaviors.

Traditionally, "place" is seen as a fixed location associated with rootedness, morality, a good life, and the idea of home. This perspective often sees mobility as a threat to these qualities, portraying the homeless, refugees, and migrant workers as disruptors of orderly spaces (27). However, Cresswell redefines "place" not merely as a physical location, but as meaningful segments of space imbued with emotional and psychological attachments, contributing to a sense of identity and belonging (2008, 134-5). "Place" also encompasses social relationships within it. In this broader context, mobility can indeed involve marginalization and exclusion, but it also carries diverse and significant meanings. Cresswell suggests that the meanings of mobility and place are shaped by narratives and stories, with representational strategies ranging from film and literature to law and philosophy capturing and interpreting these meanings, often through ideological lenses (Cresswell 2006, 3).

[32] The United Nations' "World Migration Report" notes that by 2020, there were 280 million international migrants, making up 3.6% of the global population; and in the first three quarters of 2023, approximately 975 million tourists traveled internationally.

Language thus plays a crucial role in the power dynamics of mobility and meaning. "The mediating power of the language" – referring to the ability to label, categorize, and describe different forms of mobility, along with word choices (such as the debate between "illegal immigrant" and "undocumented" in the United States; Taiwanese media and official institutions shifts from the term "foreign labor" to "migrant worker") can either reflect, reinforce, or challenge existing power structures (2006, 178). Additionally, the language used to express one's moving experiences, including physical sensations and emotional responses, is vital in conveying the personal and subjective dimensions of mobility. Mobility is experienced differently by each individual, varying in terms of access, speed, and overall experience. These linguistic representations, whether through personal storytelling, literature, or academic discourse, help both movers and non-movers construct their social identities.

In Yeo's works, his protagonists often exhibit a strong desire for mobility – to escape the stifling atmosphere of their hometown or home country in search of a better life abroad.[33] Yeo crafts a narrative in "Malu" that intertwines visual and verbal languages to convey the complexities of mobility. Through visual metaphor, cinematography and editing, "Malu" captures the protagonists' past memories and subconsciousness. Linguistically, dialogue reveals a mix of conflicting emotions – ambivalence, hesitation, uncertainty, impulse, and regret – as characters look back to the decision to leave their home or homeland. Occasionally, their emotions that defy verbal expression linger in the subconscious, only to resurface later. The fluidity and subjectiveness of mobility experiences underscores the dynamic nature of meanings. They are constantly evolving and thus reshaping the lives of those who embark upon them. These moving experiences and meanings transcend language, finding expression in the nuances of voice and body language. Therefore, as spectators, we shall attune ourselves to the subtleties of tone, facial expressions, and gestures to decode the true significance of mobility in Yeo's narratives.

[33] For example, in Yeo's 2010 short film "Inhalation," a girl working on a pig farm spends all her savings and resort to loans for smuggling to Japan. Despite reaching her destination, she faces deportation mere weeks later, forced to return to her mundane job at the farm. In the end, the dripping water of the pig farm is followed by a beautiful scene of Japanese sakura petals drifting downriver. Through dazzling cinematography, Yeo portrays Japan as a place of solace and hope, albeit one accessible only in the protagonist's imagination (Saint-Cyr, "Fleeting Images").

Upward mobility

In “Malu,” the two sisters, Hong and Lan, each embody a type of mobility they yearn for. Hong, the elder sister, was taken away from their small fishing village in rural Malaysia and their mentally unstable mother to live with their grandmother in an urban area. Unlike their dilapidated home, their grandmother’s flat is modern and cozy, elegantly furnished with fine furniture and soft lighting. Their grandmother, a strong, independent, and seemingly emotionless woman, raised Hong with a middle-class, bourgeois taste in art, even getting her a piano teacher. Hong never returned home and has not seen her mother or Lan since her departure.

The film begins with Hong and Lan reuniting after their mother's death. A few words of catching up reveal Hong’s Mandarin, spoken in a plummy, refined accent that is closer to standard Mandarin than Malaysian Mandarin, featuring clear retroflex pronunciations, unstressed syllables, and distinct tonal differences. Her sophisticated Mandarin, along with her hairstyle, clothes, accessories, and apartment, all indicate her well-educated upbringing and social class. These qualities were inherited from her grandmother, while her theatrical training further shaped her accent. When the sisters finally meet, and Lan reminisces about their mother, the peaceful scene is abruptly interrupted by Hong’s sharp and poignant voice: “If she [the mother] were sitting there, do you know what I would tell her? – You are pathetic! I pity you. I have experienced things you never could. When I lived with Grandma, I was so happy. Unfortunately, you can no longer hear these words.” Mean, bitter, and acrimonious, only the audience can see the tears in Hong’s eyes and her hand shaking as she held a cigarette. Hong’s sudden outburst shocked her sister and the audience, especially those unaware of the protagonists’ background and relationship. The emotions in Hong’s voice prompt the audience to question the reasons behind Hong’s accumulated anger and resentment. Her powerful yet dramatic outburst suggests that these lines have been rehearsed in her mind many times. Here, we can see how the mediating power of Hong’s language (accent, tone, and choice of words) shapes her own interpretation of the mobility: a revenge against her mother, proving her successful occupational and social mobility, and her better life in the city compared to her mother’s.

Hong broke free from her original social standing as the daughter of a fisherwoman and ascended the social ladder, becoming a theater producer, thus entering the realm of high culture. Most importantly, she believed that her separation from the mother liberated her from the trauma and emotional neglect. As the elder daughter, Hong was more attuned to her mother's fluctuating emotions but could neither understand nor address them. As a child, Hong would hear her mother crying in the middle of the night, while her younger sister Lan slept and remained unaware. Whenever Hong tried to comfort her mother, she was rebuffed and told to take care of Lan, who received all their mother's attention, leaving only responsibilities for Hong. Another traumatic incident exemplifies this dynamic: during a suicide attempt, their mother tied ropes around the girls' waists and wrists, intending to drown them all. Lan, thinking it was a game, did not grasp the situation, but Hong did. She cried loudly, begging her mother to stop, which initially angered her mother. Hong's cries then made Lan start crying as well, which ultimately stopped their mother from proceeding.

Hong's departure was thus bittersweet – on one hand, she felt neglected and abandoned by her mother, who kept only Lan and let their grandmother take Hong without protest. On the other hand, she was relieved to leave the distressing environment and have a better life. However, this complex mix of feelings resulted in long-lasting resentment that persisted even after their mother's death twenty years later, transforming into her revengeful speech.

After venting her resentment, Hong invited Lan to her apartment and drove away from their mother's house. This driving scene and the next scene showing her clean and delicate home, are evident to show Hong's control of mobility and elevated social status. Hong then attempted to reconnect with her estranged sister by sharing details of her work and reciting a script for an audition:

> Where has my past vanished? Back then, I was vibrant, joyous, and sharp-witted. Back then, my dreams soared, and my thoughts were beautiful. Back then, my present and future shone with the radiant light of hope. Why is it that, just as we embarked on the journey of life, we descended and became bored, gray, dull, lazy, indifferent, useless, and miserable? ("我的過去到哪去了？那時候我年輕、快活、聰明，那時候我有夢想，

我的思想優美。那時候，我的現在和未來閃耀着希望之光，為什麼我們剛剛開始生活，就變得煩悶、灰色、乏味、懶惰、冷淡、不中用、悲悲慘慘的？”; my trans. “Malu”)

As Hong recited, her voice softened and became gentle. The script’s rhetoric and rhythm, delivered in her standard Mandarin, contrasted sharply with daily conversational language, creating a performative and distant feel.[34] This defamiliarization affected not only the audience but also the characters. Consequently, Hong’s monologue and recitation felt less like an invitation for dialogue with her sister, but more like a theatrical performance to show off her upward mobility. Lan fell into silence after the recitation. That same night, Lan left without taking her belongings or saying goodbye.

Lan’s departure frustrated Hong, who failed to see that her newfound mobility, social status, and standard Mandarin alienated her younger sister, stirring feelings of hostility and envy. In the following scene, the audition script is heard again, this time performed by a male actor with a more dramatic voice. The actor tried hard to convey a profound sense of loss through facial expressions and body language. However, unlike Hong’s recitation, this performance did not create a defamiliarized effect, as it happened in the right context, an audition. The camera then zoomed in on Hong’s face, showing her confusion and inability to understand her sister’s silent departure. As such, although language helped Hong construct her own identity, it also reinforced the hierarchy and different status quos between the sisters, further driving them apart.

Transnational, nomadic and masking mobility

In contrast to Hong’s explosive character, the younger sister Lan internalized more of her thoughts and feelings so she appeared to be quiet, timid, and submissive. Later events put paid to such notions, as she was resilient and rebellious with her silent defiance. For instance, Lan took care of her increasingly ill and bad-tempered mother with patience, care, and love, yet she was

[34] As Walter J. Ong suggested, when written texts are recited and performed orally, they gain the immediacy and dynamic nature of spoken language (Ong 12). This transformation alters the text’s aesthetic and emotive impact, as it highlights a clear distinction from conversational language, which is typically more casual and straightforward.

also the one who murdered her mother in order to free herself from caregiving obligations. When she was going to start a new life, Hong's appearance unsettled Lan and shattered her self-esteem. Despite their shared roots, Hong's upward mobility, and her hateful, superior speech towards their mother highlighted Lan's stagnation – an unskilled, ordinary, working-class girl, trapped in poverty and lacking moving experience, which was particularly underscored by Hong's recitation about the loss of youth. Driven by Hong's upsetting language and with her anger bubbling beneath the surface, Lan was determined to leave her stagnant life behind and start anew abroad (Jermadi "Girls Disconnected").

Lan's mobility manifested in several ways. Firstly, she moved to Japan, a non-Chinese-speaking and highly developed country. It showed Lan's intention to surpass her sister, not just by moving to Malaysia's wealthiest city Kuala Lumpur, but by moving further as self-compensation to the loss of youth, driven by Hong's words. Lan's transnational mobility is implied in the Chinese film title, literally "the day without Ma[laysia]," which aptly describes Lan's departure from Malaysia in search of mobility and meaning.

Secondly, she made a living in Japan as a call girl, a job characterized by mobility, dispatched by escort agencies to various hotels or clients' homes. Although the sex industry in Japan is thriving and many forms of sex-related entertainment work are within legal gray zone, there is still widespread resistance to recognizing sex work as legitimate employment.[35] Sex workers are often socially ostracized and treated as though they are anti-social elements. For migrants like Lan, working in the sex industry, the situation is even more dire. Lan's nomadic job nature is thus seen as transgressive and problematic by the public.

Thirdly, Lan's mobility was constructed around a loose definition of "ethnic Chinese" through language and accents, closely connected to her other two types of mobilities. While on duty, she always wore a qipao, a stereotypical costume representing "Chinese" in Japan. Commonly seen in Japan's anime and games, this attire exaggerated certain features like curved

[35] In Japan, despite the fact that Prostitution Prevention Law of 1956 prohibits prostitution and criminalizes buying sex, loopholes and loose enforcement of the law allow the sex industry to prosper. Undocumented foreigners in the sex industry, whether due to human trafficking or overstaying, are especially vulnerable and invisible (Aoyama 263-4).

cuts, side slits, and waist darts to highlight the female body's natural curves. For Lan, it served as the perfect disguise to obscure her Malaysian origins. She practiced introducing herself in front of a mirror, using accented Japanese and various Mandarin accents, each time with a different stripper name and birthplace (Taipei, Guizhou, or Singapore), all in a sweet and mellifluous voice. While accents often signify class and region, they are also assumed to be clear markers of origin. However, Lan exploited the flexibility of accents, decoupling them from national identities – just like how film actors are often expected to cross linguistic boundaries, performing as "native speakers" with authentic accents (Lim 2014, 66). By mastering Sinitic languages like Hokkien, Cantonese, and Mandarin, along with their various accents, she created a mobility that allowed her to assume multiple identities under the porous, broad label of "Chinese." Although this multilingualism is a notable trait of Malaysian Chinese, an identity Lan was reluctant to acknowledge. Struggling with her past and her sister's "curse", Lan felt ashamed of her history which echoes the film title "Malu," meaning "ashamed" in Malay.

In Japan, Lan adopted her sister's name "Hong" (meaning rainbow), expressing her yearning for her sister's upward mobility and a bright future. She sought to reconstruct her identity in a foreign country where no one knew her past or language, which seemed like the perfect place to start anew. This is the notion that Lan interpreted as the meaning of her mobility. However, even after years in Japan, when Lan was alone, she would occasionally repeat Hong's hurtful remarks about their mother: "You are so pathetic! I pity you. I have experienced things you never could." This repetition, performed with anger and indignation, reflected how Hong's speech deeply wounded Lan's self-esteem and left a permanent scar in her memory. It destroys the myth that even after one gains freedom and mobility, and reconstructed social identities through language, one can still be haunted by painful past events.

Depicted in "Malu," mobility can also be destructive and deadly. In the new environment, despite her new identity, Lan's "rainbow" of life dimmed and lost its true colors. Mobility, while offering freedom, can also lead to a sense of rootlessness and loss of self. Lan was torn between her desire for mobility and reconstructed identity, and her attempt to reclaim her original name and true self. As Hong discovered in Lan's diary, Lan repeatedly wrote her own name, striving to reestablish the connection between the signifier and the signified, between the word "Lan" and

herself. However, the disconnection between the written (writing her own name "Lan") and the spoken (calling herself or being called as "Hong") languages may have further fragmented her identity. Also, the constant repetition of writing her name risked semantic satiation, causing her to lose the meaning of the original word. Ultimately, all her efforts were tragically cut short by her death, murdered by a customer in a forest – which can be seen as the vulnerability and invisibility brought by her mobile job nature and foreigner status.

Mobility, death, and distances

In "Malu," aside from the sisters' own mobility, another force that disrupted their movements was death. Their mother's death was the first instance, bringing the sisters together briefly after a twenty-year separation. The second instance was Lan's death, which prompted Hong to fly to Japan to reconnect with her younger sister Lan.

In Yeo's films, death is portrayed as a form of mobility, crossing the boundary between life and death. It acts as a relief, freeing one from the present life, or "this shore" in Buddhist terms – the realm of suffering, obsession, and death. Conversely, "the other shore" symbolizes enlightenment and nirvana, a state of perfect peace and happiness devoid of suffering, desire, or self. While Malaysia represents "this shore" where the two sisters were raised and trapped by memories, Japan appears as "the other shore," offering peace and contentment after crossing the seas (Kuan). Japan gave Lan a sense of tranquility, particularly in the coexistence of the living and the dead. She observed that Japanese cemeteries, situated close to where people live, are peaceful and quiet. To Lan, Japan seemed an ideal place to die, where the dead and spirits are not feared, unlike in her hometown in Malaysia.

Death and mobility share qualities that provide a certain distance, allowing individuals to narrate and reinterpret their stories. This distance enables them to review, reflect upon, and reexamine their emotional sentiments, and subsequently readjust their inner selves – something rarely achievable in daily life through words and speech alone. Yeo illustrates this point with his dreamy long pans, which artfully place the living and the dead within the same space and time. For instance, when Lan could no longer bear caring for her frail, easily angered mother, she

killed her with immense sorrow and pain. In the following dreamy scene, her dead mother "resurrected" and returned to her youth, free from illness and burden, as a young, healthy, gentle figure. She tenderly comforts the grieving Lan, promising to continue protecting and guiding her even as a spirit.

Yeo also crafted several reenacted scenes where characters reach across time to reconnect with what had been deeply buried in their (sub)consciousness. Like Hong, who had resented her mother for years, began to reconcile with her when she returned to her hometown for a visit. The grown-up Hong returned to her traumatic childhood memory witnessing her mother crying near the shore after a failed suicide attempt. With the perspective gained from adulthood and the passage of time, Hong can finally look back without anger but compassion. She began to understand and even empathize with her mother, seeing her not as an unloving and mentally unstable woman but as a helpless woman, a single mother bearing all burdens alone without emotional and financial support. Here, death and mobility provide an emotional buffer and protection from direct confrontation with one's family and memories, with its true meaning often taking years to realize and adjust.

Under this renewed perspective, Hong embarked on a journey to discover what Lan was like when she was alive. Crossing the border into Japan in search of clues, Hong gradually realized how their different fates had been shaped by their mobility and how Lan struggled for reconstruction of identity. When Hong arrived at the stream where Lan was murdered, she became overwhelmed with sadness and emotion. In an off-screen diegetic sound, we hear Hong's inner monologue, which resembles a letter:

> Lan, I have never spoken of your existence to anyone. I have always pretended you were never there. Do you have any idea how deeply that grieves me? My heart is perpetually weighed down by an ineffable melancholy. Perhaps, words no longer suffice to capture the profundity of my inner turmoil. It feels as if I have lost the ability to articulate my feelings. Only now do I recognize that I bear the shadows of my grandmother and mother within me. Even in this beautiful land, I cannot escape the torment in my soul. ("嵐，我從來沒有向其他人提起過你的存在，我一直假裝你沒有存在過。你知道，這讓我有

多麼的難過嗎？我的心，總是有一種無法說出口的鬱悶。或許，文字已不能夠形容我的內心深處。我彷彿已失去了表達能力，我現在才發現，原來我身上存有外婆跟媽的影子。即使現在，我在這麼美麗的一個國度，我還是擺脫不了我內心的痛苦"; my trans. "Malu"]

The sentimental language of this monologue, from the choice of words and sentence structure to the direct expression of emotions and nostalgic tone, creates a defamiliarizing effect detached from everyday spoken language. However, it feels more like a private, personal letter Hong wrote to Lan. This intimacy starkly contrasts with the reality that their sisterhood was torn apart by their own mobility, leading to separation and alienation – ultimately, they even became strangers to each other. This monologue conveys Hong's inability to process or articulate her emotions and share them with Lan. Only after Lan's death did Hong have the opportunity to know her and bridge the gap between them. Unfortunately, separated once again by the boundary between life and death, mutual understanding seems almost impossible. Furthermore, from this monologue, we can see the limit of mobility. Although Hong has been moving far from her immediate family and succeeded in her career, she still experienced and felt immobility as the accumulated unsettling emotions from the past were deeply planted in her heart.

Here, Yeo filled the gaps left by the unspoken and stranded emotions with visual language. To mourn Lan's death, Hong tore pages from Lan's diary, inscribed with her handwriting of her own name, and released them into the stream where Lan died, as if performing a funeral rite. Unlike the Chinese custom of burning paper money for the deceased, the flowing water symbolized the eternality of mobility, awaiting people to cross it and draw meaning from it.

In "Malu," Yeo frequently employed the visual metaphor of flowing water and sea waves to represent the fluid and ever-changing nature of mobility. This motif echoes the Buddhist concept of impermanence, which pervades both life and Yeo's "Malu". The film opens with a boat floating near the shore, accompanied by the sound of waves, establishing the central theme. Throughout the film, the sounds of waves and scenes of water flow repeatedly appear, serving as transitions to flashbacks of past memories of Hong and Lan. In one imaginary scene, both sisters

sat at opposite ends of a boat at sea, gazing at each other in calm silence. As the open water ebbed and flew, this striking image clearly states that whatever paths the sisters took, both remain inextricably connected. Much like the two identical women in Krzysztof Kieślowski's "The Double Life of Veronique" (1991), whose fate are closely linked while they subtly depend on each other's presence in the vast world (Saint-Cyr, "Fleeting Images").

The fleeting, ambiguous presence of death and the oppressive emotions that linger between people are difficult to convey or comprehend through words alone. How should we address these emotions that defy verbal expression? In "Malu," Yeo sought to bridge the emotional gap between the estranged sisters through visual metaphors, aiming to pursue subtle emotional communication beyond language. In the final scene, after avenging Lan's death, Hong emerges from a snowy forest into a more dreamlike setting. Lan appears in the snow, and then the sisters exchange tender touches without saying anything, which signifies their reconciliation.

The meanings of mobility are transformed, renewed and intricately woven in "Malu," a film rich with memories, the limitations of speech and language, and the reconstruction of identities. Throughout the film, Yeo explores the dual nature of mobility. On one hand, mobility offers individuals the promise of freedom. This mobility, intertwined with the mediating power of language, enables people to weave and interpret their moving experiences, thereby constructing their social identity. The porosity and ambiguity of language allow individuals to hide and disguise their past when experiencing transnational mobility. On the other hand, mobility can be destructive and deadly, leaving people groundless, rootless, vulnerable, and invisible. It cannot save one from a painful past and anguished memories, nor can the mediating power of language. This reveals the limitations of speech and language – particularly in our native tongue, where we are so accustomed to its rules that we are constrained by them and unable to fully express our true feelings. Words alone are thus incapable of freeing one from trauma and past memories. Only by reaching the margins of language, and stepping out of them, we may truly access our deepest emotions and possibly, understand them.

Mobility of Yeo's filmmaking

Amidst these movements and searches through "Malu", Yeo firmly roots himself in both Malaysia and Japan, finding solace in places like the Malaysian shore (origin and memories) and the snowy forest in Japan (reconciliation and possibility of understanding). These safe havens allow the protagonists to rest, reflect on their mobility, and find their place among a sea of multitudes (Saint-Cyr, "Fleeting Images).

The choice of mobility as the film's central theme defines the path Yeo has chosen as a transnational, multicultural filmmaker. His filmography reveals an ongoing journey of movement. Like his protagonists who dream of life abroad, Yeo is enthusiastic about filmmaking in Japan due to its more creative working environment, professional crews, and openness to art cinema.[36] However, he emphasizes the importance of being an "outsider" in Japan. This distance allows him to observe people and culture from a unique perspective. As Yeo stated, "Perhaps what we need is distance. With distance, you can remain some sort of objectivity. If I had always lived in Malaysia, the stories I would tell might be different" (Newt "No Moonlight Shadow"). This distance and moving experiences fuel his creativity, enabling him to re-examine his relationship with the home country. He candidly admits having many complaints about Malaysia, resulting in relatively angry tones in his Malaysian stories, often centered on political and social issues.[37] Conversely, when his stories are set in Japan, the distance allows Yeo to explore other aspects and aesthetics of cinema with a more reflective mindset. Most importantly, Yeo believes in the notion of world citizen, while his stories are about people from around the world (Bissme, "Bitterness Between Sisters").

[36] In interviews, Yeo frequently expressed feeling constrained by Malaysia's lack of support for art cinema and limited freedom of expression. He faced pressure from funding sources and sponsors, whereas Japan's filmmaking culture tends to protect the filmmaker's creativity (Bissme S. "Bitterness between sisters"). Additionally, censorship in Malaysia poses a significant challenge, leading to self-censorship, a malady that he considered affecting at least two generations of Malaysian filmmakers (Ferrarese "Malaysian Film Director").

[37] After studying in Japan, Yeo returned to Malaysia to create his first two features, "River of Exploding Durians" and "Aqérat (We, the Dead)," which address Malaysian politics and society – protesting the rare earth industry and the plight of Rohingya refugees, respectively.

After shifting to more personal and universal themes of mobility, memories and familial ties in "Malu," Yeo's next feature "Moonlight Shadow" (2021), adapted from the novel by Japanese writer Yoshimoto Banana, was filmed entirely in Japanese.[38] The narrative centers on a girl grappling with profound grief after losing her lover in a car accident, delving deeply into themes of death, boundaries, and mutual understanding. As such, "Malu" can be seen as a transitional project for Yeo, moving from films that protest political and social issues to stories about Malaysian Chinese, and ultimately to a cosmopolitan narrative in Japan. Going beyond the Sinophone, it allows Yeo to concentrate on the craftsmanship and aesthetics of cinema as an auteur. Yeo himself has honed his skills in cinematic languages, including lighting, cinematography, and poetic visual techniques such as artistic cuts, long shots, and color palettes.

Yeo adopts a flexible, organic approach to filmmaking in response to his trajectory. When directing in an unfamiliar language like Japanese, Yeo's collaborative style which encourages actors to ad-lib and improvise, helped transcend language barriers and keep performances vibrant (Newt, "No Moonlight Shadow"). This flexibility, rooted in his experience with independent filmmaking in Malaysia, often leads to unexpected discoveries and happy accidents during production. Thus, Yeo effectively utilizes the permeability of mobility, transcending the boundaries of the Sinophone Malaysian cinema and at the same time, his films illustrate an alternative developmental path for the Sinophone cinema.

[38] Yeo was offered the opportunity to direct "Moonlight Shadow" after completing the production of "Malu," when the Japanese producers extended an invitation for a new collaboration.

Conclusion

The thesis adopts a revised definition of Sinophone, emphasizing an "alter-centring" approach to study and classify the minoritarian voices and narratives within Sinophone Malaysian cinema, focusing on the affective and un-reified qualities through sonic elements. I examined four recent works under this categorization through close readings of their diverse soundscapes, including multiple languages, dialects, accents, ambient sounds, music, tones, silences, and non-verbal expressions.

Firstly, this approach illustrates the sounds of Sinophone Malaysian cinema as embodying the creolization of Sinitic languages and various accents, as well as their frequent exchanges with Thai, Malay, Japanese, Tagalog, and other language families. The rich array and oscillation of multiple sounds co-create "huayifeng," the alternative understanding of the Sinophone. Secondly, it addresses the gap in the Sinophone, which was mostly linguocentric and phonocentric, by supplementing with sonic elements like music and soundscape. This approach suits more in the fields of film studies. Thirdly, studying these diverse sounds serves as a crucial tool for reflecting the self-identity of Malaysian Chinese, whose lives are shaped by the intersections of different cultures and the frontline of cultural exchange. Most importantly, the case studies in this thesis demonstrate the spectrum of Sinophone Malaysian cinema– while they inherit qualities as descendants of diasporic Chinese, simultaneously they are experiencing localization and forging a distinct Malaysian identity.

The case studies connect to Sinophone cinema through the use of Sinitic languages, and enrich it by incorporating Southeast Asian perspectives. Sinophone Malaysian cinema prompts reflection on today's common yet narrow definition of "huayu/Chinese language," often equated with Mandarin. Filmmakers in this genre repeatedly showcase the multiplicity of Sinitic languages and accented speech. The Sinitic languages are brought to the boundaries to meet with the other cultures, like Edmund Yeo and Chong Keat-aun did in their films. And in Lau Kek-huat's "Boloumi", it highlights the hierarchy of accents by placing a Malaysian Mandarin

speaker in Taiwan, a predominantly Mandarin-speaking society. By featuring heterogeneous and multiple sounds, their works not explore the possibilities within the language itself.

The three filmmakers selected for this thesis emerged after the early 2000s Malaysian New Wave, highlighting the continued growth of Malaysian independent cinema. The rise of post-New-Wave filmmakers challenges the self-doubt of their predecessors, such as Tan Chui-mui, who worried whether their movement was a significant wave or merely a ripple, losing significance and having fewer productions after 2010; and Ho Yuhang, who felt their works did not meet the standard of excellence associated with movements like the French New Wave (Hee 2014, 63). However, through analyzing the sounds of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, I argue that though the wave seems discontinued yet it persists and nurtures more independent filmmakers. The filmmakers selected in this thesis continue to offer perspectives that are insightful and refreshing to both Sinophone and international audiences. Although they have not sparked movements like the French New Wave or Dogma 95, their efforts are marked by persistence and resilience. Building on efforts of the Malaysian New Wave, the next generation of Malaysian independent filmmakers has sought transnational funding from international film festivals and markets. Despite limited budgets, resources, and manpower, these filmmakers' visions are strong enough to leave a lasting impression. They often grapple with issues of identity, censorship in Malaysia, historical and intergenerational trauma, and a lack of financial support and knowledge of art cinema. These challenging conditions have nurtured and shaped their perspectives, enabling them to see the world with refined sensitivity and to listen carefully to people's stories. This is evident in their films' sounds, especially the silent, discontinuous, and unspoken emotions. Their filmmaking is mature, deep, calm, and skillful, even if their filmographies are not extensive. The three selected filmmakers have all won Best Director awards at various international film festivals, reflecting the unique and refreshing quality of Sinophone Malaysian cinema. The greatest challenge for these talented filmmakers is to further hone their skills as auteurs and continue delivering exceptional works after gaining international recognition.

The initial focus of Sinophone studies aims to move beyond the confines of ethnicity, bringing a broader, deterritorialized, multilingual, and creolized perspective to Sinophone cinema. However, the study of Sinophone Malaysian cinema has yet to fully embrace works by

non-ethnic Chinese filmmakers.[39] It is anticipated that more examples will emerge, enriching the field of Sinophone research.

Despite this limitation, the case studies in this thesis raises questions about the boundaries of Sinophone Malaysian cinema, intersecting with both Sinophone and Malaysian cinema. Some films transcend the realm of the Sinophone, while others bypass Malaysian cinema. For instance, Lau's documentary "Between the Stars and Waves" (2022) is entirely in Malay. Whereas "Taste of Wild Tomato" (2021), a documentary about Taiwan's 228 Incident in 1947, commissioned based on Lau's experience with "Absent Without Leave," lies outside Malaysian cinema. However, Lau's latest documentary, "From Island to Island" (2024), connects his residence in Taiwan with his homeland Malaysia, exploring the hidden history between Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule and Southeast Asia during World War II. This documentary extends beyond a single historical event or racial perspective, examining the experiences of overseas Taiwanese, Japanese soldiers based in Taiwan, and survivors of the Malaysian Suppression Massacre. Through his works, Lau continues to challenge top-down official historical narratives and reconstruct human core values, thereby enriching Sinophone Malaysian cinema with new perspectives and experiences.

Apart from Malaysia's long-standing national policies for marginalizing its ethnic minorities, filmmakers are actively engaging in dialogue with Malaysian cinema on a significant domestic level. For example, Chong's "The Story of Southern Islet" demonstrates a transcendent quality and patience to communicate with authorities for more open discussions. He continued these efforts in his second feature, "Snow in Midsummer" (2023), which addresses the May 13 Incident in 1969. The film premiered globally in the Venice International Film Festival and was approved for screening in Malaysia in July 2024, while the latter marks a significant milestone in

[39] A notable exception is Hee Wai-siam's examination of multilingualism in Malay filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad's "Orked trilogy", exemplifying the potential for expanding the scope of Sinophone studies. Yasmin Ahmad's "Orked trilogy" comprises "Sepet" (2004), "Gubra" (2006), and "Mukhsin" (2006). This trilogy focuses on a young Malay woman named Orked and her journey through love, identity, and independence, including her interracial romance with a Chinese man. In "Sepet," about half of the dialogue is in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Hokkien, and the film features Cantonese pop songs by Hong Kong singer Sam Hui as its theme music.

Malaysian cinema. While Chong's film alone did not achieve this milestone, it has significantly contributed to the ongoing dialogue with Malaysia.

Subsequently, these filmmakers reconcile their relationship and perspective with their home country, a necessary step in their journey. They make career decisions: some move abroad to tell Malaysian stories or explore universal themes, while others stay to transcend the boundaries within the country. In this sense, the oscillation of multiple sounds aligns with the filmmakers' and their works' trajectories between home and foreign places. It comes to conclusion that Sinophone Malaysian cinema emphasizes cross-border experiences, not only in terms of social mobility and physical movement, but also in emotional, conceptual and spiritual terms – swinging between diaspora and anti-diaspora, and traversing cultural boundaries in search of dialogue. These airy and fluid movements, rather than expressing diasporic experiences or merely looking back to ancestral roots, focus on reconstructing meanings and identities. Ultimately, these sounds and movements highlight the porous, oscillating nature of Sinophone Malaysian cinema.

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