

I LOVE MALAYA**FILM REVIEW:**

Just how far are we willing to go for our country? If only more documentaries, in the same vein of *The Last Communist* and *I Love Malaya*, were made on Singapore's own political history, perhaps our sense of national identity and history would be just that little bit stronger. Film-makers Chan Kah Mei, Ho Choon Hiong and Eunice Lau encounter modern day former Malayan Communist Party members in this film that tells of the quandary facing Malayan Communists unable to return to homeland Malaya as a result of their ideological allegiance and history.

Initially inspired by MCP leader Chin Peng's legal tussle to regain citizenship, the film creators' attempts to find him led them to discover the untold stories of the lives of the communists in the aftermath of the 1955 Baling Peace Talks and the 1989 peace agreements. These people and stories form the core of the film.

To appreciate the film perhaps we should understand the history behind the Malayan Communist Party. Founded in 1930 as the Communist Party of Malaya, the MCP played a big role in fighting the Japanese occupational forces during the World War II (as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army). After the resolution of the war and the subsequent Emergency era, however, the MCP found itself frozen out of the future of what was to become Malaysia and Singapore.

Amidst cries of violence against civilian population and atrocities, the MCP faced off with the British in anti-colonial skirmishes post war. Tengku Rahman and the UMNO saw the MCP as a threat with its largely Chinese make-up and communist ideals. The PAP faced communist political opposition amidst its cries of equality and meritocracy.

Three powerbrokers, one common perceived antagonist; the rest of the story is history and in this film we see the final footsteps of the MCP. This documentary could have taken two possible routes: make in depth use of the rich foundations of background and history in bringing out the story of these people, or to use their story to tell of the communist past our history textbooks do little to cover.

However, it does neither. The focus is neither overtly historical nor biographical. Instead, it is insightfully entertaining. It takes all that is celluloid friendly in contemporary history and plunks it down almost as apolitically and unbiasedly as possible.

As Hatta Moktar, publicity executive of the Substation, points out as he introduced me to the film, it is a "primer" to the myriad of questions and stories abound that lie waiting to be discovered. What awaits you is a film filled with casual yet serious interviews with lots of footage of rural life in Thailand. It's hardly enough to teach you all about history in about an hour, but more than sufficient to get you off your seats and flipping those archives at the library to learn more.

Former party members talk of the animals hunted during their jungle life, joking that "everything with four legs in the jungle except tables, we've eaten them", while some share about the logistical concerns living in the jungle, expounding line after line with the cheerful disposition of an avid nature guide. Huang Xueying, a former MCP leader now working a rubber plantation in Thailand, is a particularly interesting subject. A feisty character by nature, her modernized personality and highly opinionated quips about life in general catches the eye more than any other. One gets to see the environment and conditions they currently live in, with little voice-over and narration to take away the intimate, interviewing atmosphere the film creates.

Date: 7 March 2007, Wed
Time: 7.30 pm
Place: Substation, The Theatre
Tickets at \$7 / \$5 can be purchased from Gatecrash and at the door

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ABOUT THE FILM

Language: English, Mandarin, Malay with English subtitles

Runtime: 45 mins

Links:

www.ilovemalaya.com/

www.substation.org/2SIDF/

The positioning of Chin Peng's legal tussle at the start and end of the film, intentional or otherwise, creates a fascinating juxtaposition that highlights the conundrum of ideology versus nationhood. All in all, the impression given is that every single one of them wishes to return to their homeland to see their country, their family and their loved ones. Chin Peng chooses to fight the "capitalist" way and ironically, faces the toughest route of them all. Some of the other often resigned, self-deprecating fellow leaders (featured in the bulk centre of the film) on the contrary eventually fulfil their wishes via taking up Thai citizenship and returning as visitors.

What price ideology? Is the love for the country about building one's home on the foundation of one's beliefs, or foremost that of the prosperity and well-being of those we call fellow citizens? I Love Malaya subtly portrays the tight but weary grip with which these veterans, now in their 60s-90s, hold on to their staunch communist belief and allegiance.

Fascinatingly, there are wonderful nuances abound throughout the film especially when the film-makers interview political figures in distinctly non-political settings and atmosphere. Both its strength and its weakness lie in the fact that it reveals so many interesting points of discussion and consideration along the way but never ever covers any in depth, instead glossing over it with little or no narration or voiceovers of historical information. I like it though, for that fact that political opinions and views are left for the audience to form by subtly prompting them to source for more information, a rarity in many documentaries with political undertones.

Narratives as I mentioned earlier, are kept to a minimum as interviews with guests and footage guide the documentary along with minimal historical reference and data. To its detractors claiming a biased slant, I hasten to disagree that any more than a minority will get any impression that the film-makers intended it to be anything more than an exploratory piece.

Perhaps most striking of all is the haunting piano arrangement of I Love Malaya, the MCP anthem that gave the documentary the name. In the film, Madam Huang Xueying sings it with much gusto as it fades into a resonating echoing voice. Like the soundtrack and title piece itself, this film is felt and experienced that scrutinized or dissected. Truth is, whatever the ideological slant these people possess, what it aims to capture is the soul and character of such nationalistic and politically-driven people after almost half a century and the gradual evolvement of their lives.

To quote a man from the film, "If he (Chin Peng) returns, that's good... We're Chinese after all." Some may say politicians are the most emotionally hardened people around. That may be true, but politics itself is an inseparable mix of ideals and emotions, a constant tussle between rationality and sentiment. This film barely scratches the surface, but its attempt to will leave you roused and hopefully search for the patriotic zeal within you.

Review by Daniel Lim

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