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Film-makers on the heels of history
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CHIN who?

A few years back, that was almost how little five young Singaporean film-makers knew of Chin Peng, the exiled **communist** leader they are now making a documentary on.

Those who had heard of the former secretary-general of the **Communist** Party of Malaya (CPM) knew him only by the labels the British, and later the Malaysian government, had slapped on him at the time: 'bandit', 'terrorist' and 'public enemy No 1'.

Driven by their own ignorance and a zeal to 'know what really happened', the team set out to make Searching For Chin Peng, pulling \$5,000 seed money out of their own pockets.

They started research last March and filming late last year.

Freelance journalist and producer Eunice Lau, 29, said: 'Before Chin Peng's book came out, most of us had never heard of him. Yet, he was a monumental figure in our independence struggle. That caused us to rethink what we were taught in school and to question what had been left out and why.'

Chin Peng - whose memoirs *Alias Chin Peng: My Side Of History* were published in 2003 - is almost as unknown in his hometown, Sitiawan, Perak, if the film-makers' experience is anything to go by.

Ms Lau, of local production house Asia Witness Production, said: 'We went around the town and asked kids from Chin Peng's old school, Anglo-Chinese School Sitiawan, 'Who's Chin Peng?'

'One boy said 'a tree!'

Chin Peng, 82, who now lives in exile in Thailand, was CPM secretary-general for 42 years until a peace accord was signed between the communists, and Malaysian and Thai governments in 1989.

He is banned from entering Singapore - but was permitted to visit in October 2004 for a speaking engagement. He is now fighting a court case against the Malaysian government to be allowed home to live out his last days.

The team has done interviews with academics, and Chin Peng's relatives, dissenters and former Malayan **Communist** Party members now settled in Betong, southern Thailand.

The controversial subject made it difficult for them to get funding initially. The film-makers, aged between 27 and 30, recently secured funds from the Singapore Film Commission and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Ms Chan Kah Mei, 28, a research associate at the institute, said: 'It's encouraging that we've been given such support. It shows there is greater tolerance for alternative viewpoints in history than most think.'

The film-makers have written themselves into the plot, casting the film as a 'journey of young Singaporeans to explore the truth behind the path to independence in Malaya'.

They hope the film will present an 'alternative and largely neglected history' to other post-65ers, said Ms Lau.

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