

The Straits Times (Singapore)

Nov 27, 2006

Makers of film about communists not swayed by ideology

By Hong Xinyi



JUST FOR THE RECORD: (From left) Wang Eng Eng, Chan Kah Mei, Eunice Lau and Ho Choon Hiong just wanted to document the lives of the aged members of the Communist Party of Malaya. Christopher Len was not present when this picture was taken.

FIVE young Singaporean film-makers may have made a documentary about communists but they say that ideology is not for them.

The 45-minute *I Love Malaya*, which premiered at a free screening at the Asian Civilisations Museum yesterday, attempts to document the lives of the aged members of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), some of whom now live in designated villages in southern Thailand.

'They belong to a different era,' says Eunice Lau, 29, a former *Straits Times* journalist who's now a senior researcher with Al Jazeera International.

'I think our generation would approach issues in a different way, through direct activism.'

Another of the film-makers, Ho Choon Hiong, 31, also says he has 'no sympathies with their ideology'.

The other film-makers are Wang Eng Eng, Chan Kah Mei and Christopher Len. The team spent more than a year interviewing the communists in southern Thailand.

The project started out, however, as a documentary about CPM secretary-general Chin Peng, who's now 82.

He led the armed insurgency against the British and Malaysian governments from 1948 to 1960. The party retreated to the jungles around the border between Malaysia and Thailand in the 1950s.

In 1989, a peace accord was signed with the two governments, and many CPM members returned to their home countries. Some, like Chin, were not allowed to return. He is currently fighting a court case against the Malaysian government to be allowed home.

He currently lives in Thailand. The New Paper reported last Friday that he was spotted here, and speculated that he was here for the screening of I Love Malaya.

But the film-makers say they have no knowledge of his whereabouts and did not invite him to the screening.

'We sent him many letters asking for an interview for the documentary, but he declined because he did not want to jeopardise his court case,' says Lau.

Earlier this year, another documentary inspired by Chin, The Last Communist, created some controversy.

Shot by Malaysian director Amir Muhammad, the film, which also did not have any interviews with Chin, was banned by the Malaysian authorities, but was shown in cinemas in Singapore.

I Love Malaya, which has a PG rating, was cleared by the Singapore censors without any changes, say the film-makers, who are discussing distribution deals and considering showing it at international film festivals.

The documentary cost about \$30,000 to make, and is the first film funded under the Institute of South-east Asian Studies' film programme.