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## The articulation of anti-China-centrism in Sinophone Malaysian films

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines how Sinophone Malaysian films have engaged with China-centrism to advocate for local identity. Following the Sinophone concept, it specifically discusses the efforts of emerging Chinese Malaysian filmmakers, and how they promote local Sinophone identity in their films. The Sinophone concept, proposed by Shih Shu-mei, highlights a very important ideological intention: anti-China-centrism. Thus, this study further investigates these filmmakers' level of resistance to China-centrism in constructing their local identities. Based on analysis of a few films, such as *South of South*, *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, *Petaling Street Warrior*, *Woohoo!*, and *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, a narrative was found, proclaiming a “from China to local” identity. These films have maintained a distance from Chinese nationalism, and revealed the creole language of Chinese Malaysians used to create their local identities.

### Introduction

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysia's film industry and culture tended to be ethnically, linguistically, and culturally homogeneous or “Malay-centric,” due to the state-imposed politics of ethnic difference. During this time, the government's New Economic Policy and National Culture Policy endorsed the importance of Malay interests and subjectivity, severely impairing multiethnic participation in Malaysia's filmic scenario.

However, during the 1990s and 2000s, changes to the social, technological, and media environment gave rise to a new chapter in the Malaysian film scene. The availability of affordable, lightweight, and easy-to-operate digital video cameras and digital editing facilities “democratized” filmmaking and enabled ambitious young filmmakers to produce their own digital-format independent (indie) films. After the millennium, the cultural environment of Malaysian cinema evolved to yet another stage. In 2010, two Chinese New Year productions, *Woohoo!* and *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, made it to the local commercial cinema and achieved good box-office revenue. This has since been viewed as the watershed moment for Chinese Malaysian cinema. Starting from 2010, more films directed and produced by Chinese Malaysians appeared on the screening lists of local mainstream cinemas.

Due to the difficulty of acquiring grants and incentives from the state, indie films were mostly self-funded or produced by grants from international film festivals. However, the later bigger budget commercial productions were mostly produced by commercial

production houses and private investors aiming for commercial success. These developments have acknowledged the potential for both indie and mainstream Chinese Malaysian-made Sinophone films to shape and engage in the construction of Chinese Malaysian identities. The most important question, then, is as follows: If Chinese Malaysians have been given the chance to portray Chinese identities on the screen, what kinds of construction have they provided for the audience?

Relying on the Sinophone concept actively promoted by the American Asian scholar Shih Shu-mei, this study discusses the efforts of emerging Chinese filmmakers and how they have advocated for a local Sinophone identity in their films. The concept of Sinophone advanced by Shih has become increasingly important to academic research on Chinese cultures and identities. It highlights the wide range of communities that speak variations of Sinitic languages and dialects inside, outside, and on the peripheries of China. These include communities in Southeast Asia and minority ethnicities in mainland China. The multiple dialects, accents, and words used by these dispersed Sinitic language communities represent the multiplicity, diversity, and heteroglossia of Chinese identities. Shih emphasized that the articulation of Sinophone renders defunct the essentialist notions of “Chineseness” and the “Chinese.” In other words, the concept rejected the assumed cultural uniformity and homogenization of Chinese people and asserted that their cultures should be “place-based, everyday practice and experience, and thus it is a historical formation that constantly undergoes transformation reflecting local needs and conditions” (Shih, 2007, p. 30).

Sinophone has offered a new theoretical framework for the academic investigation of Chinese-language cinema. Shih’s book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific* (2007) persuasively highlighted the mobility of visual and cinematic images of Chinese identities around the world. It also demonstrated how these visual cultures and cinematic images have influenced the construction of diverse identities and subjectivities among Chinese people in the global sphere. The films made by Chinese Malaysians are part of this Sinophone cultural sphere. Most Chinese Malaysian filmmakers have chosen the Chinese language as the main medium for their films, and they have tended to screen the everyday lives and desires of Chinese Malaysians and the challenges they face.

Nevertheless, attributing Chinese Malaysian films to the Sinophone cultural sphere does not represent a celebration of the cultural and ethnic connections between Chinese Malaysians and Sinophone communities worldwide. The Sinophone concept is actually a response to the minoritization of Sinitic language communities living in various countries. For Shih, the notion of “Chinese diaspora” was problematic because of its Han-centric nature, which presumed that Chinese migrants and their descendants maintained a certain linkage and relationship with mainland China. In her view, this essentially legitimized the construction of overseas Chinese as “foreigners” by their host countries, ensuring that they would never be accepted as full-fledged citizens of these countries.

From the Malaysian perspective, the diaspora has been manipulated by right-wing Malay nationalist politics to tie the identities of immigrant communities like the Chinese and Indians to their “original homelands” and “ancestral culture.” In this way, their “otherness” has been preserved and they have been held apart from the Malay community viewed as the indigenous population. The notion of a Chinese or Indian diaspora and the construction of Chinese and Indians as ethnic groups separate from the

Malay are the legacy of British colonization (Abraham, 1983; Hirschman, 1986; Stockwell, 1982). The divide-and-rule ideology and the division of labor have strengthened the boundaries and differences between these immigrant groups and the Malays. In the postcolonial setting of Malaysia, the categorization of Chinese and Indians according to their diasporic identities has helped to maintain the hegemony of the ruling ethnic group that has claimed to be the legitimate inheritor of the land. It has justified and legitimized the institutionalization of various affirmative action policies in postcolonial Malaysia that have benefited the Malays and limited the economic and political influence of the Chinese and Indians.

The diaspora argument, however, has tended to overlook the ability and desire of these immigrant communities to make Malaysia their native homeland. It has subdued and rejected the fluidity and the ever-changing nature of identity. At the same time, it has been reluctant to accept that the mixing and intermingling of cultures has evolved into new cultural forms. In short, emphasizing the essentialist diasporic identity has branded immigrant societies as permanent “sojourners,” different from the “real” or “authentic” Malaysian nationals, who are the Malays. It has melded the immigrants’ identities to their ancestral home and hindered them from fully evolving into the national-cultural identity of Malaysians. Nowadays, Chinese and Indian Malaysians are three or four generations removed from their ancestors who migrated to this land. Nonetheless, their identities have continued to be treated as static and unchanged from their ancestral origins.

In theorizing Sinophone, Shih (2007, p. 185) proposed that the diaspora should have an end date and that Chinese people should be given the opportunity to become “local” and the true citizens of their host countries. For Shih, nostalgia for the ancestral homeland, as implied in the notion of diaspora, has hindered the process of localization for Chinese people in their host countries. Concurrently, the continuation of hostility and discrimination against the Chinese minority by indigenous populations has motivated the Chinese to find solace in their ancestral identity, further estranging them from the locals. The Chinese should escape from this loop and put an end to their diasporic journey. Attachment toward China is a choice. Once the Chinese have decided to end their diasporic journey, their host countries will transform from a “route” to a “root.” Thus, the Sinophone concept has a major ideological orientation: anti-China-centrism.

This study concentrates its analysis on how Sinophone Malaysian films have engaged with China-centrism to advocate for a local identity. Additionally, it explores how these Sinophone Malaysian films have proclaimed such a local identity using localized language elements that are distinct from those in mainland China.

### **The journey “from China to local”**

The films produced by Chinese Malaysian filmmakers qualify as “Sinophone” because this is the local identity developed by Chinese Malaysians. Both independent and commercial Chinese Malaysian filmmakers are conscious of their “Malaysian” identity. Although they may have resented and been annoyed by their unequal treatment as Chinese in Malaysia’s ethnically preferential politics, they have seldom denied their local identity as Malaysian. For example, when responding to the question of whether she would look for filmmaking

opportunities across national borders, the independent director Tan Chui Mui responded as follows:

I guess most of us [author's note: Chinese Malaysian] have the same complex, I don't know why we all feel like we want to stay in Malaysia, we don't like our government but we love the country. It's like we know maybe we could try to have better chance elsewhere, but it's just something about Malaysia that we really like to live there and make film from there, and yeah it's just strange and for me I don't know why, in fact we complain so much about Malaysia, but in the end when you ask, if you ask us to leave we can't do it, we just feel like we want to just stay there, to make stories from there. ("Tan Chui Mui—Roundtable at NUS ARI," 2007)

Another filmmaker, Chiu Keng Guan, offered the following remarks:

Since my high school years, the phrase "I love this land" has always left a deep print in my mind. No matter what happens to Malaysia politically, economically or culturally, I will always love this land. The environment and the people here give me a lot of inspiration. Although I left the country, I just wanted to come back. (Wang, 2010)

The rapper and film director Namewee (whose real name is Wee Meng Chee) insisted that although his songs and films have generated controversy in Malaysia, he has always loved the country and is a patriotic Malaysian. He has claimed that his creative output, including his films, has consisted of efforts to combat ethnic discrimination and heal the ethnic rift in Malaysia ("Rapper Namewee skewers racial ties in new film," 2011).

This local identity has translated into important elements of some Sinophone Malaysian films. A good example is *South of South* (2005), directed by Tan Chui Mui. This short film is set on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, the home area of the director. The first scene shows a group of people staring gloomily at a burning boat in a coastal area without explicitly revealing their identity. The next scene shows a Chinese family living in the same coastal area, dining together, when suddenly a mysterious woman appears at the door and interrupts their dinner. The woman kneels at the door and begs to exchange a piece of gold for food. The grandmother gives the woman a bowl of rice but refuses to accept the gold.

The film later discloses that the people staring at the boat are Vietnamese refugees whom the authorities have prohibited the local residents from helping. These refugees, however, resemble the earlier Chinese who drifted through the South China Sea and landed in Malaya in search of better lives. The grandmother later remarks, "Why we Chinese always suffer, they offered gold just to exchange for a pack of rice." She discloses to the audience that the refugees are ethnic Chinese. In using the phrase "we Chinese," the film tries to link the experience of drifting of Vietnamese refugees with the experience of dislocation of the early Chinese who came to Malaya. The burning boat is a symbol of the end of drifting and settling down in a foreign land, just as the Chinese Malaysians have done. The message of this short film is obvious. It describes the identity orientation of the young generation of Chinese in Malaysia today: They have made this land their motherland and do not have the desire to "return" to China. In other words, the Chinese in Malaysia have definitely formed a local Malaysian identity and are marching toward the end of diaspora, as Shi Shu-mei proposed.

This proclamation of local belongingness is perfectly demonstrated in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011), directed by Namewee. The film is narrated by the fictional character Huang Da Xia, played by the director himself, an arrogant Chinese chef who has studied Chinese

cooking in China. Proclaiming the superiority of traditional Chinese cuisine, he ridicules the local dish *Nasi Lemak*<sup>1</sup> sold by a mysterious female Malay hawker in the neighborhood. When he loses a cooking competition to a mainland Chinese chef, he is forced to close his business. He loses customers because he is unable to adapt to local tastes. Eventually, he tastes the woman's *Nasi Lemak* and realizes that the local dish is the most delicious meal he has ever eaten. To get his life back on track, he decides to learn how to cook the delicious *Nasi Lemak*. He seeks help from the Malay woman, but she instead invites him to embark on an extraordinary journey. On this odyssey of self-enlightenment, he meets many people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds: a Baba couple, an Indian curry specialist, and a Malay man with four wives. They each teach him the Malaysian ways of life and help him rediscover his Malaysian roots and identity.

In the film, the protagonist Huang Da Xia goes to the “China Institute of Cuisine” to learn how to prepare “authentic” Chinese cuisine. The establishing shot of this institute resembles a Chinese calligraphy painting with a natural landscape. Together with the sculpture of a Chinese dragon on a Chinese-style rooftop, this shot is intended to portray a kind of “authentic” Chinese ethnicity and culture. The search for ethnic cultural authenticity is also shown in a scene in which Huang is preparing Chinese fried rice, intercut with shots of the female Malay hawker preparing her *Nasi Lemak*. In this scene, the shots of Huang Da Xia are accompanied by Chinese traditional music and the shots of the Malay woman are accompanied by a traditional Malay *kompang* rhythm. The use of different ethnic music is intended to contrast the authenticity of the food representing the two cultures. In other words, food is an important cultural marker for the identities of both ethnicities. The cooking scene is followed by a rap music video sequence shot at night, during which Huang Da Xia impersonates the actor's real-life identity as the rapper Namewee. The lyrics are as follows.

I am Hero Huang, from the Huang Ancestry  
 I am here to uphold our food tradition  
 My responsibility is to maintain the originality of Chinese cuisine  
 5000 years of history is not meant to be destroyed here  
 I did not say that Malay food is unhygienic  
 Maybe it is only barely hygienic  
 Don't call me stupid because I don't like your food  
 I just wanna voice out that  
 Chinese people need to support our own.  
 We, the Chinese people need to support our own food

The lyrics of the rap song have strong ethnic tones that attend to the authenticity of the Chinese identity. Regardless of his hard work and determination to learn how to cook authentic Chinese cuisine, Huang is destined to lose to his classmate and rival, Lan Qiao from China. Lan Qiao had been the top student at the institute; Huang had only managed to achieve second place. In the cooking competition, Huang is once again been beaten by his classmate. This film shows a certain level of tension between the Chinese

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<sup>1</sup>*Nasi Lemak* refers to a rice dish cooked with coconut milk that is normally served with a chili paste called sambal. It is usually served with slices of cucumber and egg, fried anchovies (*ikan bilis* in the Malay language), and fried peanuts.

Malaysians and the mainland Chinese. Instead of being presented as people with kinship and cultural connections, the mainland Chinese are portrayed as competitors. After losing his restaurant, Huang interviews for a chef's job at other Chinese restaurants. However, he loses to the mainland Chinese, who claim that they are the "absolute authentic Chinese." What is palpable in this scene is that no matter how hard the Malaysian Chinese chef wants to become "authentic Chinese," his efforts are always in vain. He is never going to be as authentic as the mainland Chinese because he has settled in Malaysia, and his cultural practices have undergone high levels of localization. Fascinatingly, one mainland Chinese interviewee wore a Mao-style suit and hat reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. This kind of representation exoticized the mainland Chinese, emphasizing their incompatibility with the sociocultural scenario of Malaysia. In other words, the mainland Chinese in the film were represented as a kind of Other in the construction of a Chinese Malaysian Self.

In one scene Huang is shown trying to cook the local street hawker dish *Char Keow Teow*.<sup>2</sup> Failing to deliver a delicious dish, he claims that he had been unable to learn how to cook it in China, as the sauce needed to cook the dish had been unavailable. His friend, the street hawker selling the dish, ridicules him for being too China-centric and unable to localize his food to cater to local tastes. According to Tan (2011), food is strongly associated with identity. When the Chinese migrants left China, they carried their traditional cooking with them. Due to the lack of traditional ingredients, they made use of local ingredients and acquired new cooking knowledge from the locals. As a result, new tastes and new kinds of cuisine were invented. The traditional food culture underwent reinvention, adaptation, and innovation due to the localization of the Chinese people. *Char Keow Teow* is a local creation that makes use of local ingredients and local cooking knowledge. However, it has become famous globally (Tan, 2011, p. 31). Through innovations in the food culture, Chinese Malaysians have expressed their local identity by adapting to the local environment.

This scene, along with the rest of the film, strongly emphasizes the difference between the Chinese Malaysian local identity and that of China. The Chinese in Malaysia and mainland Chinese are shown as having different ethnicities, with different languages, food, and other cultural practices. The mainland Chinese and China as a whole are portrayed as strong competitors rather than close kin. Even though it is presented in a comedic manner, this film contains a certain level of rejection of China-centrism, as articulated by the Sinophone proposed by Shih Shu-mei.

*Nasi Lemak 2.0* contains a straightforward narrative of the journey "from China to local" of the Chinese people in Malaysia. The film uses the road movie genre to show the Chinese protagonist embarking on a journey of identity and self-discovery. His journey of self-enlightenment leads Huang Da Xia to embrace the color and wonder of Malaysian multiethnicity and multiculturalism, settling his (and the Chinese Malaysian) crisis of identity and eventually rooting his identity in Malaysia. The film implies that members of the young generation of Chinese Malaysians are deeply embedded in their Malaysian identity and consider Malaysia to be their homeland. They have never felt a connection with China, the home of their ancestors.

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<sup>2</sup>Fried rice-flour noodles with eggs, cockles, and shrimps.

## Distancing from Chinese nationalism

Another example is the martial arts Sinophone film entitled *Petaling Street Warrior* (2011). This is a Malaysia–Singapore co-production co-directed by Sampson Yuen and James Lee and starring Malaysian and Singaporean artists. The film is set in Kuala Lumpur’s Petaling Street during the early 20th century. The protagonists are Shi Du Yao and his wife Zhong Chun Li, Hokkien noodle<sup>3</sup> hawkers in Petaling Street who are occasionally blackmailed by local thugs and British colonial officers. After confronting the thugs, Shi Du Yao learns that he is the descendant of Emperor Jianwen of the Ming dynasty, who took refuge in Southeast Asia when he was overthrown. Zhong Chun Li knows her husband’s real identity, but has tried to hide it from him to protect him from the possible danger that came with his royal lineage. At the same time, Zhong has tried to protect the imperial seal containing a treasure map left by Emperor Jianwen. However, a group of spies from the Qing dynasty, led by a eunuch and a Japanese ninja group, come to Malaya to seize the map. Zhong and a few of her allies have to confront the spies and ninjas to protect her husband and the map.

The martial arts film genre emphasizes human acrobatic spectacle and action choreography. However, some scholars have treated it as a form of “Chinese diasporic filmmaking” (Klein, 2004), which articulates itself to an imagination of Cultural China (Lee, 2003). The genre has occasionally transmitted Chinese nationalism, especially in stories set in the last years of the Qing dynasty (*qingmo minchu*, 清末民初) and before World War II, when China suffered from political chaos and economic depression. According to Li (2001), during that difficult period, when China faced challenges and threats from the militarily superior Western powers and Japan, traditional Chinese martial arts became the cultural image associated with reviving China and defending it from external imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

Although the film is of the same genre and set in the same time frame (the *qingmo minchu* period), *Petaling Street Warrior* engages with Chinese nationalism in a unique manner. The royal lineage of Shi Du Yao is based on historical arguments about Chinese political refugees exiled to this area during the Song and Ming dynasties (Yen, 2008, pp. 221–222). Nonetheless, toward the end of the film, this “dragon’s seed” chooses to forsake his “royal blood” and settle in Malaya to become a common noodle hawker. In other words, Shi ends his diasporic identity and forms his local identity in Malaya. Any suggestion that he would have patriotically protected China through martial arts would have been unrealistic. The treasure is gone and Shi and his wife have settled far from the motherland. In addition, neither the imperial seal nor Shi’s identity as a descendant of the Chinese emperor are useful in Malaya, and in fact they threaten his safety. Thus, the film keeps its distance from Chinese nationalism.

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<sup>3</sup>Fried noodles with black soy sauce that is normally served with pork, shrimp, fish cakes, and vegetables.

<sup>4</sup>This kind of cultural imagination that carried a strong Chinese nationalist sentiment can be observed in many martial arts films in which Chinese warriors fight and defeat Japanese fighters and Western kick boxers using traditional Chinese martial arts. A famous example is Chen Zhen, the protagonist from *Fist of Fury* (1972), played by Bruce Lee, who uses his physical strength to destroy the wooden signboard that states “No Dogs or Chinese” at the entrance to a park in Shanghai. He also challenges and defeats a whole dojo of Japanese karate fighters by himself.



This distancing from Chinese nationalism is overtly demonstrated in the film by parodying the elements of Sun Yat-sen's anti-Manchu revolution. After his wife is captured by the Qing spy organization, Shi Du Yao feels helpless. It is at this moment that Sun Yat-sen suddenly appears in front of his noodle shop (this scene is based on the historical fact that Sun Yat-sen came to Malaya to raise funds and gain support from the Malayan Chinese community for his revolution). After enjoying the noodles prepared by Shi and learning that Shi has encountered some problems, Sun tries to comfort him with the following advice.

Chinese immigrants suffer from never-ending hardship to build their new homes, and yet they are deemed outsiders and get pushed around by the colonial government. But should we simply run away? No, we shouldn't, we should never run away ... We have to move ahead no matter what. Even if it is a dead end, a fatal end, we still have to face it like a man. Do not fear hardship or authority. Remember, when the going gets tough, the tough get going!

In this scene, Sun Yat-sen, also known as "the father of modern China," appears to play the role of the "parental advisor" to Shi Du Yao and other Chinese migrants. Sun's ability to raise money for his revolution was based on his ability to generate nationalist sentiment among overseas Chinese. The success of his revolution to overthrow the Qing regime in a way demonstrates the triumph of Chinese nationalism. Nevertheless, the following dialogue between Sun and Shi leaves the audience with mixed messages about Chinese nationalism. As Sun prepares to leave, Shi says, "Wait! You talk so deep. What do you work as?" Sun answered, "I used to be a doctor, and I could be considered one now, a doctor with a different means of curing people, I guess." Shi is confused and murmurs, "He used to be a doctor, and he is still a doctor? Why doesn't he just tell me that he is a doctor? His Mandarin truly sucks." Shi then asks Sun who he is and Sun responds that he is Sun Yat-sen. Shi then murmurs again, "Sun what Sen? Oh, no idea who he is."

Not knowing who Sun Yat-sen is and what his revolution is echoes an earlier scene. Coming out of a casino, Shi Du Yao and his two friends (one Chinese and one Indian) encounter a dispatcher who distributes brochures on the Sun Yat-sen revolution. His friend tears up the brochure given to them, suggesting that Shi ignore the revolution and head to the brothel instead. These scenes, with their mixed messages, illustrate the disturbance brought to the Chinese revolution headed by Sun and to Chinese nationalism overall. They mock and disrupt the nobility and the solemnness of Chinese nationalism that Sun represents. Even after meeting Sun, Shi does not become a person who care about the lives or deaths of the "four hundred million" fellow Chinese living in China.<sup>5</sup> His goal is to rescue his wife, not to help the Chinese suffering in China. His goal is purely egocentric, not communalistic or nationalistic.

For Shi Du Yao and his friends, enjoying themselves at the brothel is more important than the Chinese revolution. Thus, sex is an important comedic element of *Petaling Street Warrior*. Shi is a man longing to have sex. However, his wife avoids sexual intercourse with him and forbids him to have extramarital sex because the form of martial arts he practices requires him to be a virgin (童子功). For this reason, Shi's wife makes him wear a chastity belt. Shi is in a double bind. The need to practice martial arts has become an obstacle to Shi's fulfillment of

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<sup>5</sup>"Four hundred million people" is the famous motto of Sun Yat-sen. He always said that his deed was to improve the prosperity and wellness of the four hundred million people in China (Yi, 2013, p. 77).

his sexual desires. Yet his martial arts practice saves his life and the lives of his companions. To resolve this conflict, aided by the power (氣) transferred to him from his brother-in-law, Shi ultimately becomes strong and defeats the villainous eunuch.

Toward the end of the film, when Shi Du Yao is preparing to have sex with his wife, she warns him that the martial arts he practices will be wasted after sex. Shi answers that he will never become a “man” without experiencing sex. In other words, martial arts become an unwanted skill after he defeats the evil villain. In an earlier scene, Shi expresses his desire to sink his roots in Malaya and have his children and grandchildren flourish on the land. Undeniably, sex is the means to achieving this objective. Thus, martial arts become a major obstacle to settling down and becoming local, and can be eliminated if necessary. Shi eventually detaches himself from his Chinese lineage and nationalism. To summarize, this film tries to transform the martial arts genre from Chinese diasporic filmmaking to Sinophone filmmaking that engages with the deconstruction of Chinese nationalism and the localization of the Chinese community in Malaysia.

### Addressing local identity through localized language

Most Chinese Malaysian filmmakers have not hesitated to categorize their creations as “Malaysian-made” films. When discussing the screening of his first film, *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, in Hong Kong, director Ah Niu (whose real name is Tan Kheng Seong) recounted the following:

When the plane was going to land at Hong Kong, I was terrified and wanted to run away. *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* belongs to Malaysia, audience will be easier to relate to the film if it is screened in Malaysia. While Hong Kong is a place with different cultures and customs, was it appropriate to screen my film in a place that produced Asian films like *The God of Gamblers* and *Infernal Affairs*? It was a big challenge for me. (Malvis, 2010)

When talking about his first film, *Woohoo!*, the director Chiu Keng Guan expressed similar sentiments, saying, “I want to do a 100% Malaysian film, not even a single non-local actor” (Chen, 2009). These young Chinese Malaysian filmmakers are very conscious of their political identity as Malaysians. They have shown that the culture, ways of life, and even socioeconomic environment of Malaysia, where they were born and nurtured, are different from those of other countries (regardless of whether it is a Sinophone country or not). In their filmic creations, they have tended not to ignore these differences or localities. Thus, the locations, cultures, everyday life, and sociopolitical issues of Malaysia have become the important sight and sound elements in their films.

Although language has always been an important cultural marker of ethnic identity, it has become a prominent way to portray local identity in Sinophone Malaysian films. These films have incorporated the unique daily language of Chinese Malaysians, a kind of mixture or *mélange* of Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien (Minnanese), English, and Malay. In an interview for a Taiwan magazine, Namewee recalled that this creolization of language and vocabulary was the norm for Chinese Malaysians. He added the following:

In Malaysia, there is no language that is pure. A sentence may consist of six to seven different languages. You may think that our accent is kind of odd, but we feel this is absolutely normal. In Taiwan, you may not be able to fully understand what I said, so I have to use a Taiwanese style Chinese language to communicate in order for you to understand me. I grew up by

watching Taiwan variety programs, so I know how to communicate with you by using your language. Malaysian language can be fused easily. In Taiwan, I am able to avoid the difference between you and me, but the weakness is, I lost my uniqueness. (Su, 2013)

To put it more succinctly, Chinese Malaysian filmmakers are conscious of the difference between their Chinese language and the Chinese language used by other Sinophone communities. Filmmakers like Namewee have not expressed shame or worry over the vocabulary and pronunciation of the Chinese language, or whether it has been “pure” or “standard” enough. This kind of hybrid language is a form of linguistic adaptation to the local needs and the local hybridized societal environment. Thus, the Chinese Malaysian filmmakers have tended not to eliminate this linguistic difference but instead have heightened it to advocate for the unique local identity. The Hong Kong actress and actors Kara Hui and Chui Tien You, who had roles in the Sinophone Malaysian film *At The End of Daybreak* (2009), directed by Ho Yuhang, recalled that they had difficulty trying to express words in slang or according to Malaysian style Cantonese (“Kara Hui and Chui Tien You find it hard to adapt to Malaysian style Cantonese,” 2008). The variations of the Chinese language, in terms of dialects, accents, and vocabularies, have reflected the diverse, multiple and sophisticated identities of the dispersed Sinophone communities around the world. Polyphonic and polyscriptic Sinophone has resisted the hegemony of standard Mandarin (*Putonghua*) according to the China Beijing criterion (Shih, 2007, p. 5). At the same time, it has allowed the Sinophone communities to maintain their distinct sense of identity. This was emphasized by Lu (2007), as follows:

The multiple tongues and dialects used in varieties of Sinophone cinema testify to the fracturing of China and Chineseness. Each dialect-speaker is the voice of a special class, represents a particular stage of socio-economic development, and embodies a specific level of modernity within a messy ensemble of heterogeneous formations in China and the Chinese diaspora. This profusion of accents in fact comprises a pan-Chinese world—a collective of diverse identities and positionalities that a single geopolitical, national entity is unable to contain. *Shijie* or *tianxia* is not a monologic world speaking one universal language. The world of Sinophone cinema is a field of multilingual, multi-dialectal articulations that constantly challenge and re-define the boundaries of groups, ethnicities, and national.

The hybridized version of the Chinese language, implying the unique local identity of Chinese Malaysians, has been patently demonstrated in Sinophone Malaysian films. For example, *Woohoo!* incorporated a lot of creole and localized words used by ordinary Chinese Malaysians into the characters’ daily conversations, like *beh tahan* (“beh” is a Hokkien word that means “cannot” and “tahan” is a Malay word that means “bear”; this phrase basically means “cannot bear”), *kanasai* (“just like shit” in Hokkien, which basically means terrible), *tapi* (Malay word for “but”), *mata* (adapted from the Malay word *mata-mata*, which means police), *mata寮* (Cantonese word for police station, the combination of *mata* which means police and 寮, which means station or office), *lui* (Cantonese word that means money, adapted from the Malay word *duit*), *夠力* (means “terrible”), *geli* (Malay word for creepy), and *pun* (Malay word for also). Director Chiu Keng Guan stated that he deliberately retained this kind of language element because it would set the film apart from foreign films, and this was the locality he desired (Chen, 2009).

The film *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* also made use of creole and localized vocabularies like *botak* (Malay word for bald head), *kutu* (Malay word for lice), *diam* (Hokkien word adapted from Malay that means be silent), *shock來shock去* (shock in this context means electrify, and the whole phrase basically refers to two persons who fall in love), *雞蛋糕* (literally

means cake baked with egg, and in the local context conveys the message “damn it”), and *bakuli* (colorful glass round marbles). When the characters in the film communicate with each other, they also tend to end their sentences with words like 咩 (meah), 囉 (loh), and 啦 (lah) to add an emotional connotation. This kind of “Malaysianized” Chinese language is highly used by Chinese Malaysians in their daily conversations (Tan, 2003, pp. 42–43). Thus, new vocabularies and expressions have emerged from strong localization. This localized Chinese language has borrowed heavily from the vocabularies and connotations of the Malay, English, and Tamil languages as a result of multicultural encounters and fraternization.

Due to local adaptation and socialization, majority members of the younger generation of Chinese Malaysians are generally multilingual and able to converse in Malay, English, and Chinese languages. Some can even speak more than one Chinese dialect. Films like *Great Day* (2011, directed by Chiu Keng Guan) and *Kara King* (2013, directed by Namewee) have portrayed their characters conversing in different dialects and they understand each other perfectly. The protagonists in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, for example, conversed in a mixture of Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay, and English. The film also included a Baba (Peranakan) couple who spoke a unique brand of Baba Malay mixed with Hokkien.

The diversity of the Chinese language has been highlighted in Sinophone Malaysian films. In *Petaling Street Warrior*, the Singaporean actor Mark Lee, who played the protagonist Shi Du Yao, speaks with a heavy Singaporean accent. In addition, the film purposely includes a character (Shi’s friend, who invites him to the casino and brothel) who speaks with a northern Chinese accent that is overtly different from the accents of most of the characters in the film. *Kara King* also includes two characters, played by the veteran Hong Kong actor Ng Man Tat and a veteran Taiwanese singer, the late Frankie Kao Ling-feng, who speak with different Cantonese and Mandarin accents. This kind of representation demonstrates the heteroglossic nature of the Chinese language, reflecting the localization of Sinophone communities in various corners of the world.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, it has become increasingly difficult and irrelevant for a group of people to maintain their bounded ethnic identity in today’s world. Migration and remigration have changed people’s relationship with their ancestral homeland. Chinese people dispersed around the globe have mostly changed their routes to roots, seeking a connection with the land they have settled in. Memories of their homeland have faded due to the need to localize with in the political and economic life of the host society. The identity of the Chinese people has gone through a complex process of reformation, reconstruction, re-creation, and adaptation. The divisions and differences between those from disparate areas have demonstrated the porousness of Chinese identities. Most Chinese have sought to become “true nationals” of their host societies.

Because the concept of diaspora has been criticized for its theoretical flaws, Sinophone offers a more comprehensive theoretical tool for enquiring into Chinese identities and cultural productions. As Yue and Khoo (2012) noted, Sinophone has provided a new theoretical platform to “re-engage new sites of localization, multilingualism and difference that have emerged in Chinese film studies but that are not easily contained by the notion

of diaspora” (p. 5). Sinophone has not only been located within the oral tradition and literature; it has also been found in film and other visual creations. The visual medium has become more and more important to transmitting identities and shaping subjectivities. Sinophone has performed as an important visual cultural production site that can interrogate a variety of multiethnic and multilingual Sinophone films within their own historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Filmmaking is a form of “social practice” (Turner, 1988), and most of all it is a kind of “social intervention” (Lim, 2011). This makes film an important medium in which to construct and disseminate political and cultural meanings. At the same time, film is a sphere in which meanings, messages, and ideas clash, compete, negotiate, deconstruct, and reconstruct. Films provide insightful sources for investigation, and these help us appreciate the dynamic processes of reconstruction, adaptation, negotiation, and resistance within the identities of the Chinese people. The Malaysian independent filmmaking movement that began in the 1990s, followed by the Sinophone Malaysian commercial productions that appeared after the millennium, have provided a new frontier for Sinophone cultural exploration. The evolution of technology and the political and cultural environment have provided the Chinese (who had previously been marginalized in cinematic productions of the nation) with the opportunity to shoot and produce films depicting their culture and everyday life. More importantly, many filmmakers have used the spheres provided to them to explore the cultural and national identity of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Most of the Sinophone Malaysian films have not avoided the Malaysian locality and the unique Chinese language used by Chinese Malaysians in their everyday lives. This locality and unique brand of the Chinese language not only have provided the films with a strong local flavor but have demonstrated the high level of localization of Chinese people in Malaysia. The use of localized slang and creole language not only has challenged the hegemony of standard Chinese Mandarin, but has also portrayed the local Sinophone identity of Chinese Malaysians that is distinct from the identity of their migrant ancestors from China.

Most Chinese in Malaysia today have adopted a new local identity and accepted their Malaysian nationality. It is no longer relevant to classify them as a community that is highly oriented toward China. The older generation of Chinese, who have identified with China, has slowly faded and become insignificant in size (Wang, 2011, pp. 13–14). Thus, these Chinese filmmakers represent the younger generation of Chinese Malaysians who are rooted in the nation and have integrated socially and culturally into the broader Malaysian society. They grew up as Malaysian and have become highly embedded in the cultural hybrid environment of Malaysia, which they consider to be a unique feature of the locality.

These are the reasons why the Chinese boat people in Tan Chui Mui’s *South of South* preferred to burn their boat. They knew this was a trip of no return and that they needed to have a strong will to settle down in the land. For the same reason, Shi Du Yao, the protagonist of *Petaling Street Warrior*, was willing to forsake his Chinese martial arts, his Chinese heritage, and even his imperial identity, to settle in Malaya and have his heirs flourish in the promising new land.

As the same time, these Chinese Malaysian filmmakers have been overtly skeptical of the ethnic politics manipulated by the state’s political players. They have envisioned

a more inclusive and egalitarian multicultural nation in which every citizen is entitled to equal rights and treatment. Using hybrid cultural elements to deconstruct the assumption of an essentialized identity, they have also realized the importance of mutual understanding between ethnic groups to building a Malaysian society that is truly integrated. This is the reason why Huang Da Xia in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* embarks on an identity-searching journey. After the journey, he eventually changes his perception of Malay food and culture, and at the same time resolves his prejudice against Malays. The film emphasizes that if the Chinese want to resolve their identity crisis, they must proactively make an effort to understand the Malays and their culture, with whom they have been living side by side in the same nation for years. Additionally, the Chinese should alter their preconceptions of the Malays, because not all Malays are ethnocentric or have exclusively Malay nationalistic sentiments.

The Sinophone Malaysian films discussed in the preceding cater to different audiences, and many of them are not patronized by multiethnic audiences. This limits their effectiveness in pursuing an egalitarian civil society.<sup>6</sup> However, this has not stopped Chinese Malaysian filmmakers from using film as a medium of social intervention, and challenging the state's top-down implementation of ethnic political consciousness. Through their lens, Malaysia's multiculturalism has been given the chance to flourish. These filmic creations have resembled the Chinese Malaysian process in which they "re-imagine their citizenship" (Khoo, 2014), as they orient themselves toward the territorial space of Malaysia as their homeland. With these developments, Chinese Malaysians are marching toward the end of diaspora, and are becoming full-fledged citizens and true locals, as Shih Shu-mei envisioned in her theorization of the Sinophone concept.

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<sup>6</sup>Indie films like *South of South* mainly targeted the art-house audiences, whereas commercial productions like *Petaling Street Warrior*, *Woohoo!*, and *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* were mainly patronized by Chinese audiences. *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, however, had more multiethnic appeal because the film provided more screen space and time to Malay and Indian actors and actresses.

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