

MALAYA SPEAKS

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Malayan Film Unit

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I would very much like to try to develop a research practice at the Academy centred around a quadrangle of China-Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore relations and have begun familiarising myself with a broader literature on this theme: China and the Shaping of Indonesia, 1949-1965 (Hong Liu); A Nation in Waiting: Indonesia's Search for Stability (Adam Schwarz); The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Yuan Kew (Lee Yuan Kew, 1998); Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia 1961-1965 (Matthew Jones, 2001); The Politics of Indonesia-Malaysia Relations: One Kin, Two Nations (Joseph Chinyong Liow, 2004); Indonesian Foreign Policy and the Dilemma of Dependence: From Sukarno to Soeharto (Franklin B. Weinstein); Sukarno: A Political Biography (J.D. Legge); Confronting Sukarno: British, American, Australian and New Zealand Diplomacy in the Malaysian-Indonesian Confrontation, 1961-1965 (John Subritzky); International Relations and Asia's Southern Tier: ASEAN, Australia and India (ed. Gilbert Rozman, Joseph Chinyong Liow, 2018); Ending 'East of Suez': The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore, 1964-1968 (P.L. Tham, 2010). There are a number of lenses I initially thought to explore further into this research topic with:

the work of Robert Jervis and psychological models within International Relations theory as a mode of understanding structural dynamics in the quadrangle. In the 2018 book *Asia's Quest for Balance: China's Rise and Balancing in the Indo-Pacific*, several of the authors explore how a number of China's ASEAN neighbours such as Indonesia and Malaysia have proceeded with institutional balancing against the more overtly militaristic balancing strategies exhibited by the "Quad" nations of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The thesis could explore how cognition and perspective is informed by historical memory and Cold War experiences that continue to be mobilised through technologies of print, film and radio broadcast. I was also interested in the work of Anna Tsing in *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* documenting processes of globalisation, violence, tradition, modernity and identity erasure in the extractive frontier of illegal timber operations in Meratus Dayak, South Kalimantan. I know that fieldwork will be much more limited than this in scale and scope however I would very much like to see whether it is possible to work within an online archive and to learn how to work with archival materials to understand how the politics of translation and the physicality of source material speak both to the time they were recorded and to the time of the present and future.

I am very much interested in this respect with film as a research practice within IR theory and would like to see whether the Rashomon effect named after the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film, might be used to understand a particular critical juncture in China-Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore relations from multiple positions and perspectives. I recently found a paper by Professor Wai Siam Hee, a researcher at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and author of a recent monograph *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya Before and During the Cold War*". In the paper Professor Hee explores the work of the Malayan Film Unit, a film organisation affiliated to the British colonial government that produced a large number of anti-communist films accompanied by multilingual recordings and commentaries. 'The ultimate goal', Hee notes, 'was to interpellate Malayan identity in order to eradicate the threat posed by communist ideology during the Cold War era' and to do so the MFU

depicted 'Malayan communists and Chinese New Villages settlers [...] in semi-realistic/semi-fictional moving images.' Professor Hee opens out the question of whether the MFU aimed to 'hasten the end of empire, or was merely an extension of the imperialist machinery of state in South-East Asia.' *Malaya Speaks*: Radio Malaya was one such film produced by the MFU in 1955 and featured the newly built operations centre for Radio Malaya at the Caldecott Hills Studio in Singapore. At the end of the film, a male narrator states: "a good radio service enriches a country and binds it together. Thus, the miracle of radio engineering helps to build a nation of all these varied races, languages, and customs. For Malaya listens as Malaya speaks." In this capacity, if it were possible to work in a visual archive such as the Malayan Film Unit's, it might open out some interesting space for a critical research practice at the Academy.

On language and identity, I thought of how a thesis might also explore via film and moving image the transmission of senses of longing, cyclicity, fatalism and collapse against abstractions like development, modernity, independence and globalisation. In February 2019, before the COVID-19 crisis, Bruno Macaes tweeted: 'Seems almost certain to me that Indonesia will be one of the very few world superpowers in just two or three decades. An economy soon larger than Germany's, rich in natural resources, a booming digital economy, as comfortable in Western as in Asian ways...' Drawing on the work of Anna Tsing and of Robert Jervis, it might be interesting to probe this question, and to try to understand in more granularity how Foreign Direct Investment into the four proposed corridors in North Sumatra, North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi and Bali is perceived by communities and voices often not accounted for in IR theory. As cyclicity is explored in the works of Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Mo Yan and Du Fu, I am very interested to encounter broader writers and voices from China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore that document the changing tides of the region. I had thought in this capacity that a study on the cascading effects of the pandemic on port activity, maritime development and more general trends of economic integration and economic development indexes at the local level might be a particularly important dimension through which to evolve the thesis.

I hope in this capacity to also try to develop a deeper understanding of the significance of the Straits of Malacca, Lombok and Sunda to Chinese maritime thought, and to try to understand each in broader configuration with the South China Sea. In 2016, it emerged that India and Japan were secretly planning to install a sea wall of hydrophones between Indira Point in the Nicobar Islands and Banda Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra in Indonesia, aimed at tracking under sea movement and effectively plugging the entry to the Indian Ocean for Chinese submarines. The distinction in this sense made by different policy-makers and maritime planners as to the near seas and far seas of their operational extents might open out an interesting Rashomon experiment and possibility for juxtaposition through film with a more distant configuration of the region during the Cold War.

A further dimension of the 21st Century that could be engaged with could be the re-emergence of outer space in political-military and economic development discourses and I have thought about how it might be an interesting avenue to try to understand the legacies and future movements of the Indonesian National Institute of Aeronautics and Space (LAPAN), the Malaysian National Space Agency (ANGKASA) and the China National Space Administration (CNSA). In Malaysia, Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) is particularly active at present. One particular juncture I have thought might be illuminating is the founding of Indonesia's Space Agency, LAPAN, in 1963, which coincided with the Netherlands and Indonesia signing an agreement to transfer control of West Papua. Today, calls for West Papuan independence coincide with Indonesian militarism and LAPAN plans to establish a space port for launching low-orbital satellites in West Papua, and in this sense, how the two timelines collide and compress on one another might be explored through film, montage and juxtaposition. An avenue such as this could furthermore build on ongoing interdisciplinary studies into how postcolonial statehood, identity, the space age and Cold War generate history as a Rashomon grid where phenomenology and structuralism collide.

I would in this sense very much hope to build out a research praxis and thesis that is deeply reflexive, documenting the documentary process in and of itself, and I am very much looking forward to learning - practically, theoretically and linguistically - as much as I can to build and refine the project over the coming years. In all, I am very much fascinated by how language, memory and the technologies of film, print and radio affect cognition and perspective and would like to trace how identity and position is formed in Southeast Asia in relief to a broad neighbourhood and to grander abstractions like the Cold War, independence, Indo-Pacific, unipolarity, nationhood, ocean power, modernity, religiosity, and cosmos as they emerge from deeper histories and legacies of colonialism, war, hope, identity and community.