

# Dreams of Another World: A Review of Por Heong Hong and Victor Chin's *Five Tigers*<sup>1</sup>

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When entering a home objects such pictures, photographs, memorabilia often reveal ‘traces’ of a person, made up of his or her past. As a reflection of the owner, these objects project not only what has passed but what could have been, bearing on the possibilities of paths chosen or unchosen. If we were to enlarge this house, expand it to a grander scale to mimic that of a nation, we could then perhaps think about how these objects could then be placed into documents, archives and museums to showcase the importance of the past to the present as well as the future of any particular nation. But as many scholars would point out—the case being made most effectively by Haitian historian, Michel R. Trouillot—history is made of several layers, with some being made more apparent and visible than others. History in other words is malleable and therefore can be made to serve certain interests through emphasis or by silencing certain events.<sup>2</sup> As such the struggle over the soul of a nation often lies in the tension between revelation and oblivion.

In many Southeast Asian countries, the past is indeed a foreign country, with many of its citizens only having access to the state’s narrative which has been engineered to fill the needs of “national development” . However, after experiencing

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1 The documentary is not yet available commercially. For more information please contact the Freedom Film Network at [info@freedomfilm.my](mailto:info@freedomfilm.my) or simply click on this link: <https://freedomfilm.my/fff2018-programme/5-tigers/>

2 For more information please refer to Trouillot’s magnum opus, “Silencing the Past” (2015).

the pangs of democratization and reform, some of these countries are seeing an unprecedented flourishing of “what ifs” . Films and documentaries in particular have been the medium of choice for this kind of “mnemonic” activism. In Malaysia, local documentary film makers are experiencing a similar renaissance. In the many decades of authoritarian rule under the Barisan Nasional coalition, the wanton use of countless security and media laws created an environment inimical to free expression. This “governmentality” is a practice commonly found amongst many Southeast Asian polities designed to “enchant” its populace while striking fear into those acting against the interests of the state. But as these regimes slowly began to democratize, emerging documentary film makers, almost as if on cue, are beginning to fill the gaps authoritarianism created. Themes begin to emerge, often centred on human rights violations and of course the violence perpetrated by the state in its attempt to maintain a stable and harmonious façade through its governance.

In a ground-breaking project entitled *Five Tigers*, directors Por Heong Hong and Victor Chin navigate these themes within the context of the northern Malaysian state of Penang. Por, an academic and Chin, a photographer, painter as well as occasional documentary film maker, bring to the fore a fascinating gendered perspective on a part of Malaysian history which has long been considered taboo.

Achieving independence from the British in 1957, the leaders of this nascent nation struggled to cobble together a nation made up of myriad races from Malays to ethnic Chinese and Indians, most of whom were migrants brought over to work the colonial economy. In 1963, the Federation of Malaysia was formed to include the Bornean states of Sabah, Sarawak as well as Singapore before the island state became independent in 1965. Governing a plural society proved no easy task, as the state was intent on the maintenance of “harmony” and “social stability” within a heady politics with ideological conditions ranging from ethno-nationalism to socialism to communism. In such an environment the Malaysian government looked to its “cache” , utilizing colonial era laws to threaten “sedition” and invoking

“internal security” to “neutralize” elements which it deemed inimical to the state’s well-being.

Within this context we are introduced to the titular *Five Tigers*, a group of women activists who during the 1960s sought to change the world. Their group was given this name as a recognition of their level of political dedication and group solidarity. This moniker they were bestowed with was also due to a popular movie on the famed 5 “Tiger Generals” during China’s Warring States Period at the time. Coming from working class backgrounds, the documentary features their “education” as activists in the Malayan Labour Party. During the late 1950s till the banning of the party in the early 1970s, the Labour Party stood on a radical platform and was part of a grander leftist Socialist Front coalition agitating for equal pay and workers’ rights with a distinctly anti-western, anti-neo-colonial bent. In the documentary only 3 of the original 5 appear as the two remaining “tigers” are well into their 70s and thus were too infirm to be part of the short half hour documentary. Most of the action takes place in the lobby of a hotel as the three remaining “tigers” , Loh Siew Hong, Luo Mu Lan and Chen Shu Jing, banter about in a “reunion” filled with youthful, infectious energy as they reminisce on their days as a young group of active Party cadres. Throughout the course of their conversations, the viewer slowly enters their world, that of the working class and how they became conscientized through the Party’s literacy programs. According to the women, their education was never prioritized, so the Party’s platform offered them a way out.

To that extent, the Labour Party, the Socialist Front and its associated organisations were considered revolutionary in nature in not only opposing western neo-colonialism but also in giving a voice to the urban poor of Penang. The island of Penang had always maintained a distinct identity from the rest of the country, partly due to the fact that its majority population is made up of ethnic Chinese and that it once boasted a thriving port which brought about economic growth and urbanization on the island. However, this created an underclass, which the Labour Party and

leftist ideologies appealed to. To better understand the context of the times, *Five Tigers* should also be watched alongside a larger diet of documentaries. The first would be Fahmi Reza's *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* or *Ten Years Before Independence*, an account of how leftist Parties in pre-independence Malaysia disrupted the colonial administration's hold over economic power through "hartals" or mass strikes and Ashleigh Lim's *Stories From My Father* on the life of her father, who was arrested and detained under national security laws for his involvement with the Labour Party during the same period of time.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, there was intense political foment within the Malayan/Malaysian context which threatened not only colonial interests but the national interests of the new Malaysian nation.

Achieving independence, the newly minted government had to contend both with the Cold War environment as well as the intricacies of governing a plural society made up of different ethnicities, languages and religions. These were aspects which were unfortunately not made clear in the course of the documentary. The documentary does makes good use of archival material but what Por and Chin could have done was to put into context the state's use of extreme physical force against protestors. What exactly was the state afraid of? Why did the state arrest the father of Ashleigh Lim and then only release him without charge after so many years? Why did the state finally ban the party in a punitive show of power?

The Labour Party began its life in 1951 and sought to, "...strive for the establishment of a united democratic socialist state..." as well as to, "...secure for the workers who work by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that maybe possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service." (Tan, 2009: 244) What made the Labour Party and its ally the People's

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3 For more information on Fahmi Reza's "Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka" please refer to 10tahun.blogspot.com, and for Ashleigh Lim's "Stories of My Father" please email kisahayahku@gmail.com.

Party in the Socialist Front different from more mainstream political parties at the time was their emphasis on class rather than race. The Alliance Party, and its later reincarnation the Barisan Nasional, built a polity based on the notion of power-sharing amongst different ethnic groups with political dominance in the hands of the ethnic Malays. This legacy of race-based politics would continue to resonate well into contemporary times.

The Socialist Front, however, had a vision for an equal and progressive Malaysia where class would cut across the racial divide. This idea was at the time not only considered revolutionary but subversive.

Throughout the documentary the 3 Tigers perform the Chinese version of the Internationale and speak of the need for social justice. What was particularly poignant was a discussion of how even in a Party which espoused equality, the five of them were given lower pay, with their male counterparts being able to afford more expensive meals.

Nonetheless this did not deter them from working harder than the men within the ranks. Towards the end of the 1950s, the Party and the Socialist Front were predicted to enter into national politics after winning several seats in local council elections in Georgetown, Penang's capital. During this period, the Party managed to win several more seats within local councils in states outside of Penang, allowing the Socialist Front, "...to be a non-communal socialist alternative in Malayan politics during the 60s." (Tan 2009: 244) As the front progressed into the early 1960s its fortunes began to change.

As the Socialist Front became more effective in its administration, the government at the time was also taking notice. Prompted by allegations of malpractice in several city councils which they governed, the state then began arresting several high-ranking members within the Parties. These arrests, some of which done under the rubric of the notorious detention without trial Internal Security Act, severely diminished the power of the Party, given that their use was targeted

specifically at its leadership.<sup>4</sup> In reaction many of its rank and file members then organized an effort to protest at the heart of the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The three tigers then recount how they made their way to KL despite the obstacles placed in their way by the government. In one scene Luo Mu Lan remembers how she even braved the tear gas rounds fired by the police with nothing but a wet handkerchief. Interestingly, the documentary then begins to showcase a series of photographs of women, both young and old, protesting against the arrest of the Party leadership and physically resisting the police. This was a clear indication on the part of the directors trying to emphasize the role of women in political activism both intellectually as well as physically. It is also interesting how the directors arranged for the three of them to stand in front of the police headquarters on the island of Penang with them defiantly stating that, “we used to have many protests here” . Towards the end of the 1960s any hope of reviving the fortunes of the Party became slim. Protests demanding the release of Socialist Front leader, Ahmad Boestamam, as well as further democratization fell on deaf ears.<sup>5</sup> The death knell finally sounded when, in the wake of the 1969 race riots, local elections and thus councils were declared null and void. These local councils were the lifeline between the Party and its members. The 1969 riots which reached their peak on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, altered the Malaysian landscape in limiting the scope for vigorous political activism, and making illegal any form of open discussion and/or agitation towards race, religion and royalty.<sup>6</sup> Malaysian democratic institutions shut down for several years leaving the federal government’s unelected National Operations Council in control while activists and other “undesirables” languished as political prisoners under the nation’s repressive

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4 The Internal Security Act 1960 was originally promulgated to maintain national security but due to its wide ranging powers, the Act could be used against dissidents, which meant many were detained without trial for many years. There have also been many allegations of torture by those who were detained under this law. For more information please refer to Syed Husin Ali (2008) and Kua Kia Soong (2010).

5 For more information on the life of this nationalist leader please refer to Ahmad Boestamam (2004).

6 For more information on the aftermath of these riots please refer to Goh (1971). Other accounts include are Comber (1988) and Kua Kia Soong (2007).

security laws.

The documentary does not delve further into what happened to them after and only shows that they married, had children and went on with their lives. There is also very little indication given as well as to what had happened to the leftist politics in Malaysia after the riots. One must however understand that the documentary is only half an hour long and in order to delve deeper, not even a full-length production would be enough to provide a perfunctory understanding of politics during the period. It is therefore to the credit of documentary film makers such as Por, Chin, Fahmi and Lim, who contribute through their own individual efforts, snippets of glimpses into the world of leftist politics in Malaysia. While the documentary began with Por's mother returning to Penang on a ferry, the documentary ends with three comrades separating in the middle of a field in front of what used to be the city council's office when the Labour Party was in power. The documentary is also replete with scenes of several old buildings in decay as the three ladies make their way around the island of Penang. Now derelict, these houses which dot the commercial areas were in the past hotbeds and centres of Labour Party activities. The very same kind of activities the 5 Tigers would have been involved with.

To a certain extent, these scenes seem to me bittersweet. Growing up in Penang, my everyday experiences would encompass criss-crossing in and out of its streets lined by these very same buildings. To me, they were simply quaint old houses. Little did I know of the significance of these streets and buildings until I was made to look closer by Por and Chin. The stories told by the three women and the many places which appear in different segments of the documentary provide us with more questions than answers. Like old family pictures you might find in someone's house, this documentary and the journey it takes us through beckons to larger questions at hand. How does race continue to feature in the Malaysian imagination? Does class no longer have any form of political saliency within the Malaysian context? And more important how did events of those years serve to sever Malaysia from its

vibrant leftist past?

Just as old photographs or even buildings leave behind “traces” , though silent, these objects often leave behind a ghostly vapour trail of what was. At the same time they also raise questions as to how the past might now feature in the present as the nation enters into a new phase as a “New Malaysia” . How can its past as shown so vividly through the stories of the women tigers, inspire Malaysia to go beyond its narrow obsession with the national rubrics of race and religion? The answer to these questions is now wholly dependent on the push by documentary filmmakers such as Por and Chin in utilizing their presence within a more open polity. In such a climate and with less restrictions on civil society, the documentaries have the potential to ignite the imagination of younger Malaysians, and thus break the stranglehold of ethnic politics which have for so long entangled the nation.

Documentaries, and the works of “mnemonic” activists such as Por and Chin, will hopefully become staple not only in Malaysia but throughout the Southeast Asian region. Just as Malaysia was enveloped in the mists of its official national narratives, independent film makers, through their controversial works, can break through this active “silencing” and perhaps force these states to reckon with their past.

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