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Nostalgia and intervention in colonial archives

They were once "communist terrorists", now they are objects of nostalgia, national heroes neglected by history and nation. For those who want to pay them homage the place to go are the 'peace villages' in southern Thailand where ex-Malayan Communist Party guerrillas settled after the signing of the 1989 peace accord that formally ended the communist insurrection that began in 1948. Betong is a grimy town near the border, visitors come to shop and for the seafood, and not a few men for sex. For some, though, the real attraction is Chulaporn Village No. 10 a few miles away.

This village sits in a lush valley. Silver streaks of the corrugated roofs break the expanse of tropical green as the land slopes gently up towards the distant hills. In mid-morning the mist clings to the forest still, but close to the road the sun has sliced through the low clouds and shows up the rows of huts, neat and well-spaced like suburban dwellings—houses of the ex-guerrillas and their families. On the road people are walking about, each with a wide straw hat, one hand holding a basket, a scythe or a spade: a mundane village scene in Asia. The bus stops outside the History and Heritage Museum. Inside are the sad remains of the tools of the revolutionary—firearms, ammunition, pamphlets and flags, aged and dust-covered on the display tables. Outside the museum I meet a group of young students. Chirpy as young birds, their faces wet from the heat and excitement, they have come from Kuala Lumpur, a sprightly young woman tells me, to find out for themselves "another history of the struggle for independence." She talks as she scans the village with her video camera, then zooms in on an old Chinese woman's bouncy stride down the road. To her everything is a photo opportunity, and in her mind every stranger on the road is an ex-guerrilla fighter, an embodiment of revolution and anti-colonial struggle.

In the peace village the 'old comrades' run shops, guesthouses and eating-places, and take tour groups to the old jungle camps and hideouts. In the evenings, they hold court at the Peace Restaurants and tell tales of endurance and great suffering. "The most frightening were the bombers. They flew so high, just specks below the clouds. Then the bombs came: the explosions all around you, the horrible noise they made; you lay flat and tried to dig the ground with your fingers." The audience listens with rapt attention. The storyteller's eyes glisten, his voice a sad quiver as he speaks, stirred by what he has called up from memory. This is what the audience has come to hear, the 'revolutionary heroes' have not endured the struggle with the mute stoicism of beasts, they have lived a life of mighty purpose and nothing can be held against them.

There is the desire for revolution, but one makes sure they are not on the wrong side of history. We in Malaysia have ours: the communist uprising that started in July 1948 in post-war British Malaya and ended with a ceasefire agreement in 1989 signed by Malaysian and Thai governments and the Malayan Communist Party in southern Thailand. The four decades of conflict have made the Malayan Emergency, as the anti-insurgency was called, a roost for ideological illusion and historical myth. There's nothing like an abortive revolution to coddle romantic nostalgia for those who fought for the 'good cause' and failed. For the vanquished, they nurse their past like a self-inflicted wound, painful but worthwhile. While the Malaysian State continues to push the line that The Emergency was a great anti-communist crusade, the ex-insurgents, physically and ideologically spent, are settled across the border, a sad remnant of a once great adventure. Thus, a mission awaits to rescue them from oblivion and restore them to their rightful place as 'national heroes'.

Even I have had a go at it.[1] A leftist academic, I took to the book project with zeal. At the university, Marxism was of the 'arm-chair' sort: strong on 'culture' and meek on the practicalities of guerrilla warfare. One avails oneself to the literature on The Emergency written by historians and strategic studies experts—virtually all anti-communist and pro-British. The leftist writings were, with few exceptions, in Chinese, including personal memoirs of ex-insurgents retired in Hong Kong and Macao after spending decades in exile in China. While the academic literature tends to be pro-British these writings are predictably self-serving and nostalgic.

For a writer—and for an artist too, all this poses a formidable challenge. How does one navigate the mud slog of ideological illusion and justification, on both sides? The Emergency covered the years 1948 to its official ending in 1960; it dragged on intermittently until 1989 with the signing of the peace accord. These four decades cover tumultuous world events: the British post-war reoccupation of Malaya, founding of People's Republic of China, the Korean War, the Cold War, the wars in Indochina with communist victories in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and the fall of the Soviet Union. These events affect the way we view the world and anything that has do with communism and revolution. As for communism, one cannot but point to its moral bankruptcy in Maoist China and the Soviet Union, and in Malaysia we are reminded of what took place in our neighbourhood, especially the genocide by the Khmer Rouge to bring about a new Kampuchea. The communist revolution in Malaya did not succeed. In Malaysian people's minds the conflict is a ghostly shadow, a mixture of actual events, imagination and ideological misconceptions. A vertiginous stupor follows your every step as you wade through the texts, documents and artwork. The dividing line is clear and binding. The official version is, the British were fighting for democracy and later the Malaysian State maintaining peace and order, while the MCP were attempting to seize power on direction of Moscow and Beijing. On the other side, the British were holding on in empire's twilight in Malaya, and the insurgents were fighting to bring about a rice-bowl revolution for all citizens. If only for that, you want to be on the side of the communist insurgents, but post-Cold War geopolitics as much as communist regimes' colossal debacles pull you back.

The Singaporean artist Sim Chi Yin also went to southern Thailand to meet the ex-insurgents and visit the guerrilla bases and ambush sites. Sim's work has long had a strong political tinge. Before her current series on The Emergency, there was a series of photographs of Chinese miners with black lung disease and migrant workers in Beijing, and her travel to the North Korea-China border produced desolate images of nuclear installations and the surrounding landscape. However, it is The Emergency's communist insurrection that has most preoccupied her. The Emergency is, in one sense, a primarily a 'Chinese story': the MCP leadership and guerrillas were mostly ethnic Chinese, so were their victims.[2] The artist's grandfather was a communist sympathizer captured by the British and sent in exile to China, where he later died. A decade in the making, her various 'interventions' were brought together in a photographic exhibition, *One Day We'll Understand*, a set of images of the Malayan conflict, and its companion work, *Remnants* (2017–ongoing) at Zilberman Gallery, Berlin, in October 2021.

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[1] Souchou Yao, *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a small, distant war*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006

[2] See Anthony Short, 'Race and politics in Malaysia' *Asian Survey* 10 (12), 1970, pp. 1081–89; also *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya 1948–1960*, London: Frederick Muller, 1975

Many of the images in the *Interventions* series utilize documents from the Imperial War Museum in London. These are pictures of waging a war of low-level conflict, of long-range patrols and the use of helicopters: military deployments that later become familiar during the Vietnam War. In contrast, the artwork in the *Remnants* series is of relative quietude, meditative. Included here are photographs of ambush sites and old guerrilla camps, and a video installation of former deportees and exiles performing revolutionary songs.[3] There are still suggestions of blood and violence, but the tone of the images is relatively muted, along with its overt polemics. The referents and images that constitute *One Day We'll Understand* are diverse, complex. It is not too much, as you mentally take stock, to approach her work as posing a dialectic, a dialogue of opposites and counterpoints.

For Sim, graphic realism is a blunt instrument that has to be undermined. We witness in *Interventions* the profound ambivalence in photography's testimonial to reality. With her postcolonial bent, the images retrieved from the Imperial War Museum offer an expression of her political stance. One image shows a British soldier on a patrol, his back turned, a figure flanked by dense bushes and all but swallowed by the jungle mist. In another, a helicopter is suspended in mid-air, your eyes follow the rope and the soldier making his descent. It is an image of stillness, there is no frantic whirling of the helicopter's blades to suggest the sense of flight. The images have been reworked and manipulated, as evident in the brownish tint that edges out the natural green your mind, if not the eyes, expects of a jungle war. To add to its effect, the archival marks on their reverse are also seen to recall their home in an institution devoted to memorializing British military ventures overseas. And pointedly, the soldier descending from the helicopter is set against an enlargement of a memo that identifies the item in the museum's catalogue. The effects are achieved, we are told, by placing the pictures on a lightbox and photographing them. There only a small sense of imperial grand gestures in these images, yet each casually reminds you of its origin and political significance. The manipulation aims to deface, to vandalize, the very potency—and the imperial associations—the photographs assume for themselves. This is a fairly conventional artistic makeover, but one granted a philosophic weight by Susan Sontag's keen admonition: "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality… One can't possess reality, one can possess images."[4] The past is a battlefield, everyone can have a go at making it theirs, and in shaping it in their own ideological image. Clearly, the images in *Interventions* insinuate an intent—an alternative narrative that is anti-colonial, pro-insurgent and 'communist-friendly'. It settles your mind. In Malaysia, or Singapore—the artist's home country —such a 'communist-friendly' exhibition would certainly raise a few political eyebrows. It apparently did not in a city that had historically faced the wraith of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. There you have it: the palpable silence on the moral catastrophe of communism in Asia and Eastern Europe.

We know the defacement of the official images of The Emergency is meant to reverse the ideological mirror: the British military the villain, the insurgents the heroes. Yet, this is assuming too much—a sin the follows the artist in all her work. For the alteration of images has other effects than imperialism-busting; the manoeuvre has the habit of retreating to obtuseness. When that happens, it creates a strange evocation that the postcolonial magic of counter-narrative is not so easily pulled off.

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[3] https://www.zilbermangallery.com/one_day_well_understand-e287.html; accessed 10 March 2022

[4] Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Straus & Giroux, 1973, p. 44

One image, *Remnants #11* (2017) shows an elephant appearing from the dark jungle charging toward the viewer. The image is not defaced as such, but tetchy manipulation disorients the viewer and defamiliarizes the familiar. Elephants are a legend in the insurgents' lives, a source a food when a shot could be risked; the felling of the beast was a celebrated occasion for the men and women on a starvation diet. Is this what the artist has in mind? What occurs here is a modishly postmodern gesture that destabilizes the image and its discursive potency. In a rare moment, things are left wide open. Our mind wanders to other terrains. If the images celebrate the hardship of the insurgents' existence, why not consider the natural grandeur of the jungle, or the lyricism of an Eastern adventure, such as T. E. Lawrence in Arabia? The lithe signification of nature edges aside the oppressive ideological intent. The viewer is let free and allowed to make up their mind. It is a moment of rare pleasure to be had from an exhibition.

For all her erasure and defacement of the real, Sim appears to be only half aware of realism's fetishistic power of self-representation. An image insists on telling its own story. It is hard put to tame it to serve a singular narrative. After the magnificent beast in *Remnants #11*, it is a shock to reach the ultra-realism of *Remnants #19* (2015–18), a stark image of an artificial limb. If this is to elicit pity for those who suffered at the government counterinsurgency, the social and political elements feel hemmed in. The artist has already turned the table, you are led to see the image as a part of the horror of the imperial undertaking. In this, the artist is aided by the stark pictorialism, as much as by her predilection for interpretive certainty. In this struggle—for the viewer as well as for the artist—the battle is always half won. Through the image, the artist has tried to solicit a sense of pity for those who suffered. But the wheel of exegesis does not stop its turning. There is meaning on top of another meaning. The clinical depiction, the medical inferences: they flatten the alternations of a particular history, and they universalize a revolutionary violence that is packed full of its specific agendas and strategies. It is disorienting to see the work going the way of the 'in a war everyone suffers' bourgeois sentimentality.

We do not expect an artist to be consistent in their work, in the conceptual scheme of their execution. We like them to sustain one step at a time in keeping the mastery of form, the next holding the work to the free, exuberant play of ideas and in their realizations. Artistic strategy, like carnal tenderness, is best left to soft whispers and affectionate insinuations. Never coy with her intentions, the artist of *One Day We'll Understand* shows her cards openly. If Sim's guileful reworking of the images of war is strategic, so is her turn to stark realism. It puzzles us but a little when we ask, what drives the artist's work? Where is the conceit? Where is deployment of the actual and the imaginative, the fantasy and socially real, that propel artmaking? The artist wants to have her say and has made the communist insurrection the presiding preoccupation. In one aspect, the work in both the *Interventions* and *Remnant* series try to achieve a sense of different polemical heat, of a blend of manipulated images and naked pictorialism, but they do not move into a position of dialectic engagement. They feel disconnected, when connection and focus are evidently what the artist is looking for. By the time the viewer engages the *Remnants* series, the Sontag-like rebuttal of pictorialism—evident in her defacement of images—has all but been abandoned. Realism has become a commanding feature.

One image, entitled *Interrogation* (2020) in the *Remnant* series shows a group of captured insurgents squatting outside a police station—four sorry-looking men, their hands bound, their eyes downcast. As they wait to be interrogated by the police, some would perhaps wonder at their fate. After their trial, if found guilty they would face imprisonment or the death penalty, and some

would be sent to Communist China to suffer the deprivations of a socialist paradise. The detainees look stoic, pathetically young. Each thrusts out his chest a bit for comfort or in a feint display of defiance. Pictures of insurgents, you remember, all seem to look like this in the newspapers and official documents. At the police station, on the mud path under guard after capture, it is the same taunt figures of men and women, the same cotton shirts and blouses and dishevelled hair, the same mystified look in their eyes: "What next?"

It is a photograph of brown pigment, otherwise free from any doctoring. There is nothing more expressive of Sim's identification with the insurgents than this image of evident pathos. Art's charming conceit collapses: there is no more the 'almost real', no more the teasing denial of 'what you see is what you get'. You feel photography's validation of the real is affirmed. Realism is a striking yet risky strategy. You feel what you have seen gives you a certain knowledge of what is depicted. Not only that 'a picture is worth a thousand words', there is also the sheer magic of the sensation of the eye. Still, words and ideas never give up, as they circle around and around the war wagon.

What makes *Interrogation* such a defining act in the exhibition? The answer is surely the fetishistic power of similitude, the likeness between what we see and the piteous figures waiting upon their fate. The work is without conceit; the secret is out. The artist wants to arouse your conscience; the anti-colonial fighters deserve fair treatment. But similitude is not enough to achieve this without tacking onto something outside itself, without the play of ideas. For our identification with the insurgents is a double fact. For the moral personality of the communists is allied with the lack of the same in a British soldier. The lack of moral excellence in the enemy is a code, a discursive sleight of hand that illustrates the abundance of such a trait in the figure of our identification.

The divide in one and the other is organic, natural. The result is a kind of non-person who "can be grasped as the positive expression of anything — animate or inanimate, good or bad, real or imaginary—that 'person' is not."[5] As the philosopher Daniel Heller-Roazen explains, his idea of a non-person is tied to the idea of being a person, in the sense that a "nonstarter" is a starter, a "non-event" an event, or a "nonentity" an entity.[6] *Interrogation* is all but dependent on this work of inferences. What happens when we refuse to observe the game plan? Does one side so easily reflect the other's lack? The British military was no angel, neither were the insurgents. Facing the artwork, we feel we are being hauled into a cause we barely recognize or agree with. This is the pitfall of the postcolonial take on The Emergency that the artist so keenly puts forward, a conceptual weakness that haunts the exhibition at every step.

As with *Interrogation*, *Remnants* #3 is sparse and oppressively silent. In the stillness, 'absences' of all sort press upon you. Domestic normalcy should be here, but it is not. And the rickety furniture is impotent in making a stand against the truancies. Those from Malaysia recognize it as a room—probably the eating area—in a house of the working poor. The table, the faded plastic chairs, the concrete floor, the wooden partition of old paint: they make no pretence to interior decoration. From the doorway, you see a television on top of a cabinet, chairs neatly stacked, a white table—the sitting room proper. Here in the eating room, you can imagine, after a meal and the dishes are cleared,

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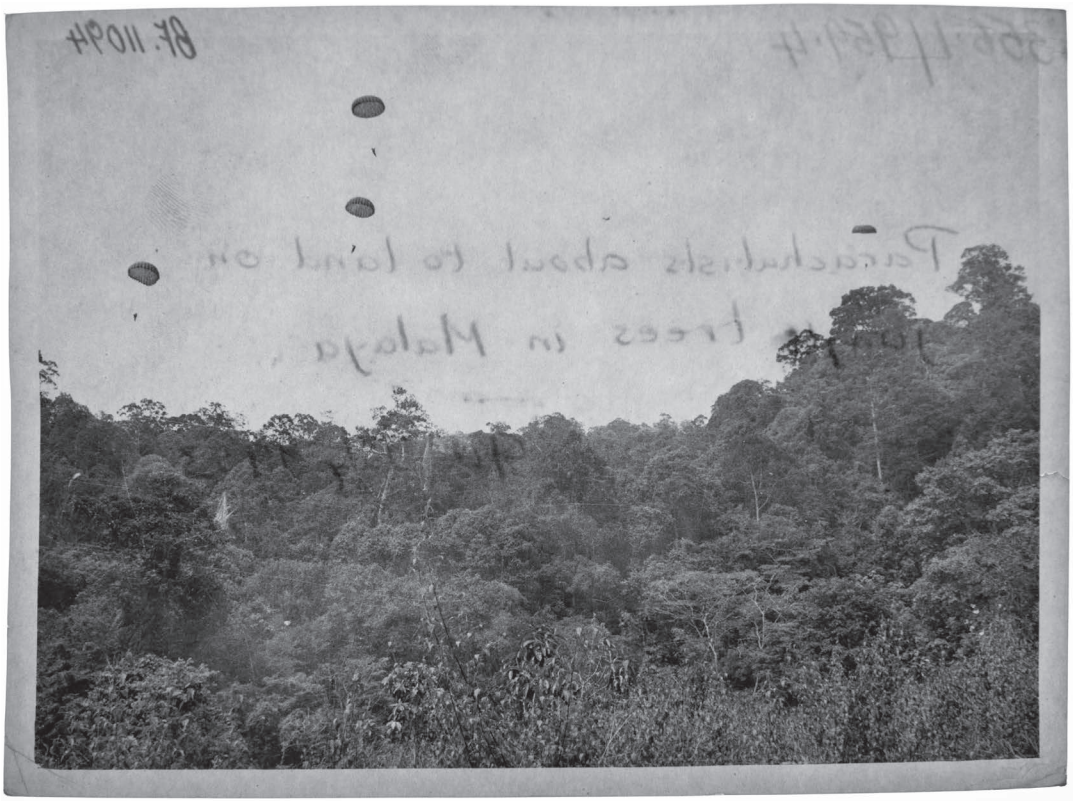
[5] Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Absentees: On Variously Missing Persons*. E-book. New York: Zone Books, 2021, p. 17

[6] Ibid., p. 19



the adults would gossip and talk about the recalcitrance of the young, financial worries, good news of someone getting a new job—the preoccupations of any working family. The rustic room may well reflect the artist's own family background, but we don't know this. It is a picture of want, but there is no suggestion of penury or grave deprivation; lean and well kept, the room lends dignity to a family of limited circumstances. Most communist insurgents would have come from a family setting like this, perhaps including the artist's grandfather. If this was indeed the case, the artist has come a long way from Singapore to Berlin, from a regional artist to one of international fame. In this movement, in this professional upgrading, the sense of nostalgia is hard to ignore.

It is easy to make too much of the 'absences' in the room, as if an 'absence' simply implies non-presence. We recall Heller-Roazen's insight: an absentee is not one who is non-present, so much as one who lives vicariously through its other and its opposite qualities. Read 'absence' as 'loss' and you begin to feel the artist's need to fill the room with all kinds of referents. It may be a cliché to suggest the room is symbolic of the artist's own loss—but of what? Maybe the loss of existential certainty due to her communist-grandfather's death. Perhaps it is aligned with the fact of the insurgents' sad end in various manners. Or 'loss' is a reminder of the failed anti-British insurrection, a theme that haunts the whole exhibition. All not unreasonable guesses; the artist's persistent prodding has inexorably taken us there. The picture has told its story. Or has it?

This from the Marxist critic Georg Lukács: "The central aesthetic problem in realism is the adequate presentation of the complete human personality."[7] By "complete human personality" he does not suggest individualism at the core of bourgeois humanism. As a Marxist thinker, he could hardly approve of the depiction of men and women except as a complete being socially and historically constituted. "For the inner life of man," Lukács writes, "its essential traits and essential conflicts, can be truly portrayed only in organic connection with social and historical factors."[8] In other words, representation of the real must conform to certain aesthetic laws: "The true artistic totality of a literary work depends on the completeness of the picture it presents of the essential social factors that determine the world depicted."[9] The key word here is "totality." An author—Lukács is speaking of the nineteenth-century novels of Scott, Balzac, Dickens—must break through the appearances of the individual characters so as to reveal the historical and political contradictions they embody. The common sin of Marxist thought is reductionism, the idea that a person's individuality can be explained solely by history and the social circumstances that have made them. Lukács is more subtle, for him to show up a character's total character is to give them a moral complexity beyond the self-calculating individual. Literary realism—like art's visual power—is so riveting, so aesthetically satisfying that we tend to forget that while people make themselves, they are also fashioned by social forces outside themselves. Thus, the problem of realism: its enthralment makes us belittle the social and the broader circumstances. No wonder, after the defacement of the official images of The Emergency, the return to realism feels like a let-down. The sparse room in *Remnants #3* loses its potency, a depiction shorn of social truth or association, in Lukács' phrasing. The signifier does not engage, but direct itself to the personal, to the artist herself. In an interview with the writer Maaza Mengiste, Sim reads a letter she wrote to her dead grandfather:

> *Dear Granddad,*
> *I never met you and the family, from the time I was a child, never talked about you. Except once. Dad mentioned in passing that you had died in China in the 1940s and, for some reason, had a monument built to you. I thought it was strange that you – having been born in Hong Kong but then taken as a baby to Malaya, where you grew up, lived, and worked – would have died in our ancestral village in China. Your father had left the village at the turn of the 20th century, along with a wave of migrant Chinese labourers headed for Southeast Asia, America, Australia, and Africa. And why did the family never talk about you in the 60 years since your death? Why does Grandma's gravestone not bear your name?*
> *One Chinese New Year, on my visit home, my mum handed me a black and white photograph. The man in the photograph stood confidently, hands on hips. He was not tall, had a high forehead and thick lips... and a camera was slung around his neck. Another photographer in the family? I was intrigued. I've driven around northern Malaysia and southern Thailand, in the towns where you'd lived and worked, in the so-called 'black areas' where the Communists were active. Where they had ambushed Commonwealth soldiers, shot British rubber estate managers, where they hid in limestone caves, lived with tigers and elephants in the jungles. I visited old tin mines founded by the British, and that jail where they had kept you*.[10]

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[7] Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, London: Merlin Press, 1963, p. 8

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid, p. 147

[10] https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sim-chi-yin-maaza-mengiste/; accessed 10 March 2022

What teary emotions and longing are expressed in the letter. In her work—in her life, her martyred grandfather looms large. The letter sets itself firmly in the present, but the past the author refuses to let go. Reading the letter reminds me of the communist apparatchik mother in the film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) who falls into a coma just before the reunification of Germany and wakes up to a post-communist world while her mind is marooned in the Soviet past. She suffers from the malaise of "Ostalgie"—nostalgia for the East—and in Malaysia and Singapore, 'East' was the Socialist Malaya that never came about. And this nostalgia has an urgency, a psychological impulse that cannot be repressed and fills every crevice of the sad, empty room. If the gallery room is sparse, it is also crowded with memory and the artist's unassuaged yearning. What it offers up is the doubleness of realism: its ability to drawn attention to itself, and its reliance on all manner of absences. Absences and emptiness always insinuate presences. It is the principle of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, as much as that of Sim's eerie room. The insurgents, those prosecuted and banished to China, victims of the conflict, and the artist's grandfather are residing in there, figures of imagination and of the artist's own creation.

Nostalgia is a form of desire, it finds expressions in wilful and unconscious forms. I had an experience of this when, accompanied by a guide, I went to the Martyrs' Memorial that commemorates the 1970 purging of alleged spies and counter revolutionaries who supposedly infiltrated the MCP. Before the monument, with the boiling sun beating down on us, we—I an academic, he an ex-jungle fighter—were both out of place and historically irrelevant. The MCP's homicidal errors were imbedded in each dent of the memorial; any sense of our nostalgia was washed over by its grey ugliness Sim has bravely hung on to her postcolonial ideal which is her strength and as well as her weakness. As she rewrites the communist insurrection into personal narrative, the communal suffering morphs into private grief.

The communist revolution in Malaya was a failed revolution, and there is nothing more romantic than an abortive rebellion. It is a romantic vision borne out of despair, and the need to salvage some residue of grandeur from what happened. Your mind is filled with the 'near misses' and 'if only'. With a failed revolution, it is all ideological reverie and there's little need to confront the reality and its consequences. We know that struggle sessions were held in the jungle to stage the persecution of alleged spies and subversives: an aping of the Cultural Revolution that took place at its height, in China. Perhaps that was evident enough of the MCP's quick turn to violence, and of communism's propensity for blood and prosecution of enemies of all hues and shades.

History is invariably a blend of actual events, public myth and personal memory. When history is written down, its carries, in every aspect, the author's presence and desire. And history is endorsed by images artists and others have created to celebrate or condemn a past, and to serve the present. Do we need to go into history's busy traffic with images? From Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) to the socialist realism of the Soviet Union and Mao's China—each is a contribution to the making of history, each is a sign of political thought of different ideological hue. With The Emergency, the issue is not one of veracity, or even one of restoring 'revolutionary martyrs' to their rightful place in history. Before that, we have to reckon with the very power of images: the way they move us and render real and normal what we see. Pictures are not only 'worth a thousand words', but in their potency, they are 'words' themselves. Images are silent but never dumb. What we encounter in

the streets, at home before the television, or in an art exhibition constitute what the anthropologist Michael Taussig calls "implicit knowledge."[11] With its profound banality, "implicit knowledge" makes us blind to the reasons why certain things are real, and certain ideas true and valid. And this we witness in *One Day We'll Understand*: when an historical event is transformed into images, it becomes objectified; it is given a tangibility it does not have. The Emergency becomes a smooth-running narrative where the divide between heroism and villainy is clear cut and unbreachable.

With history's hindsight, we know communism is not free from ideological illusions or straight falsehood. But why stop there? Why not engage with the impossibility, the fetishism built in all ideologies and their narratives? For an artist, this is an undertaking that has to face unflinchingly both truth and falsehood—just as they have to, more viscerally, act out the intangible and the phantasmagoric. With The Emergency, so much a part of that history is a sense of reverie, an emotional stupor that we have associated with the uprising and its repression. In the same vein, we may ask: apart of the 1970 mini-Cultural Revolution in the Malaysian jungle, if the MCP had actually come to power, would there be struggle sessions to prosecute the pro-British reactionaries, the Malay feudal elite, the 'running dogs' that put themselves behind the blood deeds of the counterinsurgency? The struggle sessions would be reminiscent of those that took place in Mao's China. But China is too far away—in history and in distance. Then you remember: communism is not so. The Southeast Asian region too has seen the genocidal rage of a communist regime: Democratic Kampuchea under the rule of the Khmer Rouge.

Sim's genius has been her way of making us cease our pondering when the Malayan Emergency presents itself as a story that leads to more stories. Such is the potency of her work that it makes us willingly, complicitly give over to her view of things. The other reason is the ideological tenor of her work. Who these days would want to cast doubt on a series of artworks full of the heat of anti-colonial polemics? Who would not want to cheer an artist who aligns herself against the post-Cold War neo-liberalism? Postcolonial studies have left their mark on artmakers and writers. The effect, however, is not all positive. We tend to forget postcolonialism is not anti-colonialism. With the best of postcolonial literature, terse polarity of perpetrator and victim is muted, even broached. It was Edward Said who wrote, "On both sides of the imperial divide men and women shared experiences—though differently inflected experiences—through education, civic life, memory, war."[12] This is true for any European colonies as for Malaya. And speaking of "shared experiences", had not the British and their post-war enemies, the communists, once joined in fellowship in the fight against the Japanese in the Second World War? In one sense, Said's insight simply points to the nature of everyday life in a colonial situation. In Malaya, the British ruled and imposed their authority, while the people lodged themselves in the system that oppressed as much as it protected life and property. British rule was one of great political fairness: it often left sufficient slack in the reins of control and oppression such that its benign intentions came through for most people. We do well to remind ourselves of this relationship, this bridging of the structural divide when we approach something like The Emergency.

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[11] Michael Taussig, 'History as sorcery', *Representations*, no. 7, Summer 1984, p. 87

[12] Edward W. Said, 'Always on top', *London Review of Books*, 25(6), 2004, p. 3

Yet, much of the postcolonial approach to artmaking is about shutting the fences when the flow of traffic promises so much. On "shared experience" something can be made of the friendship between MCP leaders, particularly Secretary General Chin Peng, and the British officers to whom protection and aid was given in the darkest years of the Japanese occupied Malaya during World War two. One of the British officers, Spencer Chapman—the 'T.E. Lawrence of Malaya'— wrote in his book *The Jungle is Neutral* (1949), his full praise of the communists who made up the only effective anti-Japanese force after the expulsion of the British.[13] Such facts would have enlivened Sim's project, giving it a greater worldliness and conceptual poise.

Writing this based in Australia puts one in a reflective note. Looking back, it seems remarkable that the artist's approach to colonial history and the righting of wrongs are resonant with much of the artmaking in Australia. Like Sim, Australian artists and writers have challenged the nation's colonial history, emphasizing the massive deprivations of the Aborigines. And the notion of social justice is extended to a canopy of contemporary issues on gender equality, the acceptance of the LGBTQ community, the admission of refugees and asylum seekers. Allied with these are the contested identity politics and the interrogation of history. All these are hopeful signs of progressive agendas as they come to prevail in Australian art practices. It is, of course, the nature of political art to take sides, to choose the perpetrators and identity the victims; still this pursuit is not without its unhappy outcomes. This critique of Sim's elegant and powerful work has been to shine a light on the way a postcolonial approach to artmaking tends to polarize and impede imagination's palpitating flow which, lest we forget, is worth the fight for as well. In contemporary Australia, each of us is not a racist or a non-racist, a perpetrator of social injustice or their victim; but both if only some of the time. In Singapore and Malaysia, enticed by the romantic grandeur of communist revolution, postcolonial revision of history has taken us down the path where insurgents tread on the side of justice, and those who question their cause on the side of the pro-British loyalists. In this sense, Sim's approach is at one with what is prevalent in the West generally: the postcolonial revision of history, the pursuit of a form of identity politics that is both affirmative and censorious. At worst, both approaches enable the bolting of the door of debate, the shutting down of the free play of ideas and perspectives. If it has not come to that, it is something art practitioners from the region should make a point of resisting. Australia has, since the governments of Prime Ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, worked towards being a part of fast developing Southeast Asia, economically and culturally. Perhaps we should seize the spirit: lessons can be learned across the region, and the boldness and the defections in Sim's artwork serves to illustrate both the possibilities and the perils for Australian artists in their own take on the postcolonial project.

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[13] Spencer Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1949