

SOUCHOU YAO

The Double-Agency  
of History:  
*Art as Fake*



To enter Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's world is to step into a land of ancient intrigue, each footfall stirring up the dust of betrayal in the kingdom of shadows. Like Roland Barthes' "Japan", this too is an "empire of signs". Ho's two-channel video work *The Nameless* (2016) overwhelms you with the sheer doubleness of things, where nothing can be pinned down; but unlike Barthes' Japan, the signs are less pointers to meaning than a strategy to induce confusion and the fatigue of misrecognition. *The Nameless* is a work that ever energetically denies itself, ladled with no small measure of conceit. The story of Lai Teck, the triple-agent who rose to the post the Secretary General of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), is familiar to this academic hack.<sup>1</sup> But a sense of unease stays with me like the bite of a beast refusing to let go. It is the power of Ho's engaging work to unsettle what we know of this intriguing history of Malayan communism, the trouble being the 'social facts' regarding Lai Teck and his career are themselves already in the realm of fantasy, products of reinvention by all manner of people. *The Nameless* thrives on the real in order to subvert it, in the best tradition of installation art. As you rest your eyes after viewing the videos, what presses on your mind is not an intellectual affirmation of Malaya's radical history, but endless replays of images featuring the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai, stern and silent one moment, James Dean-like, methodish self-preening in another.

It is a bold move to put something full of hearsays and velvety shadows to deconstruction. Historians agree that Lai Teck was the most enigmatic secret agent in British Malaya. Born in 1901 in Vietnam to Chinese-Vietnamese parentage, Lai Teck allegedly served the French in Indochina. He was recruited by the British and brought to Singapore in 1934 to infiltrate the MCP. He became Secretary-General five years later, and informed the British security service on his comrades' activities. Under his leadership, and in connivance with his British master, Lai Teck set the MCP on a path of peaceful political struggle, and later during the Japanese occupation (1941-45) he worked with the British stay-behind parties in the Malayan jungle, offering them protection and support. Arrested by the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police, he defected again and served the invaders. One of the fruits of his betrayal was, in September 1942, the massacre of more than a hundred members of the MCP who had gathered in Batu Cave, north of Kuala Lumpur, for a secret meeting. The MCP high command was virtually wiped out, but the Secretary-General never arrived for the meeting. After the war suspicion began to circulate about Lai Teck and his activities. The MCP started an investigation on Lai Teck. A Central Executive Committee meeting was scheduled in March 1947 to air the various complaints against him. Lai Teck chose the more convenient route of not attending and seconding with the party funds to Hong Kong, then to Thailand.

This is dry background stuff. Perhaps more worthy of art is the man's lurid end. Bent on revenge, after Lai Teck's departure, his successor, the twenty-three year-old Chin Peng tracked him down in Bangkok and organised his execution. In early 1947 the new Secretary-General, accompanied by a Thai communist, saw his nemesis: a figure in the hot, crowded street buying something from a

street vendor. Chin Peng rushed to the Bangkok headquarters of the Vietnamese Communist Party in Sukhumvit and told them of his sighting. But once again Lai Teck slipped away, and found himself in Hong Kong where he was said to have conferred with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. But the British colony of Hong Kong was not the safest place to carry out an assassination and Chin Peng followed the man back to Bangkok. The Viet Minh agents had news—Lai Teck was hiding in a small house by a canal. A three-man Viet Minh assassination squad was sent. When they saw Lai Teck, one gripped him by the throat and throttled him to death. The assassins found some discarded hessian bags, wrapped the body and waited for nightfall. As darkness fell, they heaved Lai Teck's body into the muddy waters of the Chao Praya River. Nothing was left of the man save the legend, the romance of a triple-agent, and the non-whereabouts of the money he stole from the party coffers ("Lai Teck's Gold!").

What fertile ground upon which to rewrite the narrative of a troubled life! Art grants us the liberty to break free from the constraints of facts; and meditation on Lai Teck's extraordinary career has the potential to take us to a terrain at once familiar and full of existential gloom. We have heard it all before, though we are not immediately sure where. Perhaps it is Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), for whom the first fateful act of betrayal by abandoning ship follows him like an ancient curse from which there is no escape. Or perhaps it is André Malraux's 1933 novel *La Condition Humaine* (*Man's Fate*), about the abortive communist uprising in Shanghai. As the character, the revolutionary Chen Ta Erh, is drawn deeper into the clandestine world of intelligence and assassination, terrorism becomes for him a field of being, both a freedom and a trap. Being so close to death, it became his companion, his own double. His killing after the failed assassination of the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek feels like destiny's call against which he has no will to resist. Lai Teck was similarly awashed with treachery, similarly dragged through history's bloody tide. For him being a triple-agent must have been like a modern Casanova with multiple lovers, each night spent with one is a stab in the back of the others in the circuit of conceit and deception. For us, instinct or the need for survival often makes us believe and live in our own lies. Each of us is paired with a fake of our own making, a double of what we are.

In *The Nameless* Ho drew heavily on his own engagement with Lai Teck's bad faith and multiple identities. The two videos, one narrated in Mandarin, the other in Vietnamese, is each shown in a separate room, literally enacting the duplicitousness in Lai Teck's career and the state narrative about the radical left in Malaya through appropriated filmclips from Tony Leung Chiu-wai's famous films (being hugely popular in Southeast and East Asia). In a career stretching over four decades, the versatile Leung has appeared in films ranging from romantic comedies, to historical dramas, crime thrillers and Kung fu epics. It seems right that an actor of such diverse talent and brooding intensity should emerge from the celluloid to become the betrayer of the communist cause. If Lai Teck had gone through the hall of mirrors in his acts of betrayal, Leung's images are but evocations of gloom and despair that featured in so many of his films. It is easy to catch the sources and their referents. Leung the pimp and crime boss in Tran Anh Hung's 1995 film *Cyclo* is not quite Lai Teck the communist leader and anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter, but in *The Nameless* both share an intrepid silence made necessary by their respective careers. There are glimpses of Leung in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), though it is Brigit Lin who is the listless *flâneur* in the film. And the brief clips from John Woo's *Hard Boiled* (1992) are ingenious, where Leung plays a undercover cop, straddling between his two masters out to destroy each other: the moral tone of one entrapped and seeking deliverance is a hard to miss reference to Lai Teck's moral burden.

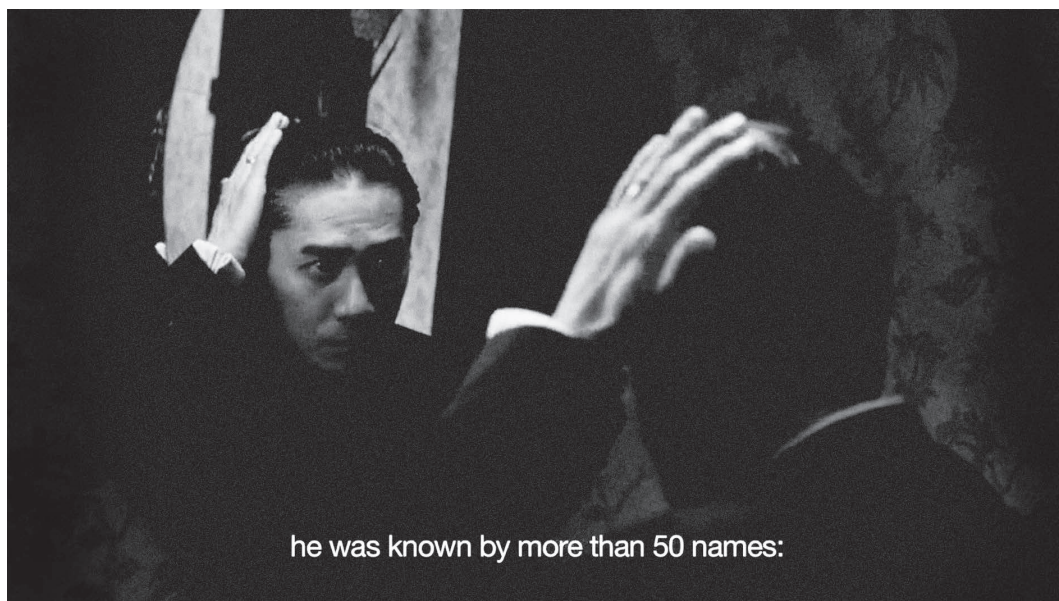
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The art of the narrative belongs to the police



he was known by more than 50 names:

*The Nameless* is an immaculately crafted work. The strategic use of Leung is one thing, the other the painstaking attempt to ‘smoothen’ the images, rendering them with the same colouration and consistent aesthetic tone. The trade of any video artist, the method contributes no small way to the merging of two protagonists of different times and places. With a sure and a subtle hand, Ho guides the viewer through multitudinous references and meanings, both surprising and prescient. Not only Lai Teck’s dealings, the political creed of British Empire in Malaya and its postcolonial inheritors too were a legerdemain of deception.

In an interview with *Ocula* magazine, Ho was described as “a critical historian, examining hegemonies to expose their structures and faults,” his work untangling “the threads of fictionalised myths and political histories in his intellectual and highly aesthetic practice.”<sup>2</sup> It is an appraisal any artist with a deconstructive bent would find worthy. Yet, installation art has its particular character and peril in the execution and the making of meaning. When I first read Michael Fried’s essay ‘Art and Objecthood’<sup>3</sup> I was struck by its suspicion of absolute formalism on one hand, and of what we may call “social and cultural reading” on the other. Objecthood in art turns artwork into a self-serving entity, detached from the ideas and discourses of the world. Though Fried did not say it, the ‘thing-in-itself’ quality which he delegated to the Minimalist artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris has a legacy in Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. To read Fried via Marx, artwork can be, like labour and social relationship under capitalism, infected with objectification that feeds on itself, without drawing on the wider social and economic influences. Against ‘art for itself’ the other sin is when artwork is viewed as nothing more than a product of the wider social surround: the peril of social reductionism. If objecthood makes too much of artwork’s autonomy, social reductionism degrades it, turning it into parasitic thing of social forces and popular desires. Fried’s nemeses are the devotees of art-for-art’s-sake, and academics and critics who built their careers on social and cultural readings of art. Fried’s finely tuned argument is brimful of the dialectical tone. Out of Fried’s complex web of ideas it is sufficient to bring forth the point: objecthood and social-cultural influences are each potent in art and art-making, it is only that we need to recognise the lingering effects of both in shaping the viewer’s experience. In this, the viewer ‘sees’ an artwork as it is, yet somehow is also touched by history. The dialectical twins are never conjoined, and Fried roots for a staging of art—for a form of theatricality—that hikes up the complex connections between art and its viewing experience.

Singapore is a society obsessed with its own history. With its independence in 1965 after being expelled from the Malaysian Federation, what is celebrated as national history is a bare fifty odd years. But the heavy hand of nation-building, the nefarious undertaking of the state under the incumbent People’s Action Party, gives everything about the island republic a recognisable mystifying hue. This excessive consciousness of history may well be a major character of Singaporean art practice. It brings to my mind Zai Kuning’s *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission Of Knowledge* (2015) shown at the Singapore Pavilion for the 2017 *Venice Biennale*: an expansive, monumental installation that rescues the history of the Riau Archipelago and its sea people, the *orang laut*, from national neglect; also the performance artist Ming Wong’s *Life and Death in Venice* (2010), a video installation that is a wholesale mimicking of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912), with Wong playing the aging writer Gustav von Aschenbach, all white linen suit and summer hat, in his restless meandering across the canal. There is no direct reference, as in the mode of Zai Kuning, to Singapore’s regional history. But an inevitable postcolonial reading, that Aschenbach now inhabits an Asian figure—a Chinaman in linen suit—allows Wong to turn his double’s scouring mission into his own. While Mann’s Aschenbach is his proxy for meditation on

philosophy, eroticism and passion, Wong's figure is more modestly and banally about personal identity to be foraged from history, a project of different intellectual and emotional qualities. Despite its intent, the subversion is only half a bid to success.

*The Nameless* is similarly weighed down with the national history—or the poverty of it. Ho's method is to alloy two figures whose careers are full of magnificent insubstantiality. This fact makes Ho's deconstruction a curious move. For everything about the Secretary-General is faked news. The 'fact' of Lai Teck's treachery or heroism, depending on one's point of view, fragmented and shorn of a solid footing, simply does not lend itself to easy demolishing. It's like chasing after a ghost, or better like Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), or Leggit in *The Secret Sharer* (1909), the communist leader is always slipping away from the narrators' grasp. Lai Teck, already cast in the phantasmal, does not stand still for the comfort of the artist or the critic. The real Lai Teck and his undertakings puzzle and confuse. This is the major difficulty of *The Nameless*: how do you interrogate something that has already been thoroughly, assiduously, catechised by all manner of people: the British intelligence, the MCP leadership, the postcolonial states in Singapore and Malaysia, and not the least, the befuddled academic specialists. In Fried's language, with a work like *The Nameless*, the aesthetic formalism and historical referents are deprived of their integrity, one that is non-existent in the original figure in the first place. Viewing the work, it is hard not to feel the heavy burden of 'social facts'. For all its reference to history, *The Nameless* stands on soggy ground; there are no confirmed certainties which it can target as the source of mystification and deceit. And without such certainties, the magnificent doubts and suspicions it evokes in the viewer lurches towards intellectual nihilism, a boat rudderless and adrift in the open sea.

*The Nameless* is a work we want very much to like. We share Ho's need to rehabilitate a people's history of communism and to take the state to account. We want to root for a kind transcendence beyond the strange mirroring of ghosts in order to find something we may claim as 'our history'. Yet, in our post-postmodern world how do we know that 'our history' is not another hall of mirrors? *The Nameless* assiduously spins the loops of discursive impotence and it feels at times the work toys with the prospect of a real history, a history rehabilitated from falsehood and mystification. Truth, if that is the right word, is surely too modest an aim for Ho's majestic, inventive work. Not only in the age of Trump is truth a corruption of lies and faked news. Empirical facts serve poorly the production of artifice; the choice for art and art making is not Trump, but Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant."<sup>4</sup> Or as the anthropologist would say, art is like a menu: it points to something real but itself is not a meal. When Ferran Adrià, the "Salvador Dali of the kitchen" got his own exhibit, he offered clay models of his famous dishes, but lapsed into the tediously unarty when he served dinner to the donors.<sup>5</sup> Art is both the subterfuge and the bridesmaid of the real. In installation art, much effort is given over to creating a visceral experience for the audience. The Russian artist Ilya Kabakov has famously described of his "total installation" that, "The main actor... the main centre toward which everything is addressed, for which everything is intended, is the viewer."<sup>6</sup> This may be a gift—the pure meditative pleasure—for the viewer, but it also extends indebtedness to the viewer who is a participant in the exhibition. This cannot but suggest the viewer's own complicity in the making and remaking of truth and falsehood in art practice. In an era of faked news, the viewer deserves better. But then the vileness of fakery which Lai Teck's life had been, and the mighty weight of truth—do not exhaust the possibilities of what art can and should be. This is relevant for Ho's video installation, as for Ferran Adrià's 'food is not for eating' project. To lighten the writerly task I watched Orson Welle's 1973 film *F for Fake* before I began; in the voiceover he says,



*Every true artist must, in his own way, be a magician, a charlatan. Picasso once said he could paint fake Picassos as well as anybody, and someone like Picasso could say something like that and get away with it... today I believe that man cannot escape his destiny to create whatever it is we make—jazz, a wooden spoon, or graffiti on the wall. All of these are expressions of man's creativity, proof that man has not yet been destroyed by technology. But are we making things for the people of our epoch or repeating what has been done before? And finally, is the question itself important? We must ask ourselves that. The most important thing is always to doubt the importance of the question.<sup>7</sup>*

Welles' enemy is the art market whose voracious appetite for artwork that would turn a spectacular profit led to fakes and imitations. But then as art tells the truth, it also lies evocatively, creatively, in a way that lifts itself above from pure falsehood. In this sense, all creative enterprises are to a degree in bed with 'fakes'. Welles tells us in this voiceover that Picasso could paint fake Picassos as well as anybody. Someone like Picasso could have so grandly got a way with it, and we wish it too for Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Nameless*.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Souchou Yao, *The Malayan Emergency: Essays on a small distant war*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Elliot Albrecht, 'A conversation with Ho Tzu Nyen', *Ocula*; <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ho-tzu-nyen/?auth=req>; accessed 16 September, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum* 5, June 1967. This essay has also appeared in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, London/Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 148-172

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/07/06/199047678/museum-exhibit-celebrates-iconic-spanish-chef-s-food-as-art>; accessed 17 September, 2017

<sup>5</sup> 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant' is poem number 1129 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, London: Faber & Faber, 1976, the only one-volume edition containing all Emily Dickinson's poems

<sup>6</sup> See Claire Bishop, 'But is it installation art?', *Tate Etc.*, Issue 3: Spring 2005

<sup>7</sup> The last major film completed by Orson Welles in 1974 focusing on the life of professional Hungarian art forger Elmyr de Hory, and the nature of authorship and authenticity; it also involved the participation of the infamous hoax-biographer Clifford Irving