Malaysia's Hidden Histories in the Public Sphere

Michelle Low-Shamir

University of Birmingham

Abstract

Exploratory research on the state of Malaysia's use of media to frame its collective identity and past demonstrated that the state actively attempts to promote a collective identity that simultaneously embraces Malaysia's culturally diverse society and prioritises *Ketuanan Melayu* (translated: Malay Supremacy). Like other postcolonial societies, Malaysia struggles to define its collective identity and past because its social demographics changed significantly with the arrival of the British in 1786. To repair the sociocultural and political injustices brought about by colonialism, the Malaysian state inadvertently silenced various ethnic communities in its national narrative. Therefore, this paper aims to understand how Malaysia's past and collective identity shape and are shaped by the public sphere, specifically popular culture mediums. Using a thematic analysis, the author analysed three primary sources: i) '*Pendatang',* ii) '*Dari Dapur', and iii)'Sang Kancil'.* The analysis explored how the public used these public spheres to challenge *Bangsa Malaysia* and the national History textbooks. In conclusion, this paper demonstrated the power of public spheres as a medium for social justice and reparation of a postcolonial multiethnic's collective identity and past.

Keywords

Malaysia; public sphere; hidden histories; Bangsa Malaysia; reparative futures; popular culture

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The author's family is what most familiar with Malaysia's sociocultural landscape would refer to as '1Malaysia'. Her immediate family are Malaysians of Chinese heritage while her husband is Malaysian of Indian heritage, and her brother-in-law is Malaysian of Malay heritage. Collectively, her family comprise the three most visible ethnic communities of Malaysia, yet this union of cultures remains a surprise to Malaysians because Malaysia struggles to embrace its cultural diversity.

In December 2024, the Malaysian Housing and Local Government Ministry hosted a Christmas open house for all to attend. The Ministry and its minister Nga Kor Ming received backlash from PAS, Malaysia's Islamist political party because the open house involved Muslim staff who are strictly prohibited from being directly involved in non-Muslim celebrations. The PAS secretary-general, Takiyuddin Hassan also claimed that since its independence in 1957, the Malaysian state does and has not openly organised non-Muslim celebrations at state-owned premises, let alone involve Muslim individuals. Nga responded with a reminder that the politicising of religious and ethnic celebrations encourages division of the nation based on ethnicity and undermines the uniqueness of Malaysia as a multicultural nation (Kaur, 2024). Nga's sentiment is supported by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim who at a recent 2025 Independence Day celebration reminded the Malaysian public that "... no country can survive if it accepts incitement of racial hatred. No country can be independent without a spirit of cooperation, unity, and identity ... let's not forget that independence was paid for at a high price, in lives, property and the sweat of all races," (Astro Awani, 2025).

A Socio-Political Background of Malaysia

Although Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the state continues to struggle to define its *Bangsa Malaysia* (translated: nation of Malaysia). The British colonised *Tanah Melayu* (translated: land of the Malay, Malaysia's name pre-independence) for almost two centuries which resulted in dynamic changes to its sociocultural and political landscape. First, the Malay sultanates' loss of independence and power as they were reduced to figureheads with influence over Islamic and Malay customs only. Second, the emergence of *Tanah Melayu*'s twin pillar economy – the rubber plantation and tin mining which led to the mass arrival of economic *pendatang* (translated: immigrants) from India and China. The third was the implementation of the 'divide and conquer' policy which led to the division of the economy based on ethnicity. For example, the Malays maintained their traditional agricultural lifestyle, the Chinese dominated the tin mining industry, and the Indians were involved in the rubber plantation sector. To ensure the Malays, Chinese, and Indians remained in their designated economic sectors, the British introduced vernacular education. Not only did vernacular education emphasise the ethnic-based economic activities, but it also encouraged each community to lean into their respective ethnic ideologies, beliefs, and knowledge without British intervention (Embong, 2021). These changes fostered a spirit of ethnic nationalism which pivoted when the British introduced Malayan Union post-World War II, as an administration to centralise the Malay States and the Straits Settlements of Penang and Malacca. The administration received strong opposition from the Malays who argued that the *jus soli* citizenship threatened their status as the people of the land. This opposition led to the emergence of modern Malay nationalism which remains an ongoing issue for *Bangsa Malaysia* (Rahim, Mustaffa, Ahmad & Lyndon, 2013).

This is not unique to Malaysia as postcolonial societies are a relatively new phenomenon that emerged in the mid-20th century owing to the colonisation and decolonisation of the Asian and African regions. Many ethnic communities in these regions were forcibly united or separated to form political, economic, and/or social entities born of colonialism and unfamiliar to them. Owing to this, many postcolonial societies like India, Zambia, and Malaysia were and are forced to

reimagine their collective identity (Bondarenko, 2021). This act of re-imagination is tricky as *Tanah Melayu* was a homogenous society before the arrival of the British while Malaysia is a multiethnic society filled with groups that support or oppose the notion that *Ketuanan Melayu* (translated: Malay supremacy) must be protected regardless of the imaginaries of what *Bangsa Malaysia* is (Shatir, 2021).

Bangsa Malaysia and Ketuanan Melayu

Former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir introduced the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept in 1991, as part of his Vision 2020 project which aimed to mould Malaysia into a fully developed nation-state (Ishak, 2006). He defined *Bangsa Malaysia* as "people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa* Malaysia (translated: Malaysian language), and accept the Constitution," (Tan, 2010, p.469). However, historian Dr Ranjit Singh stressed that the concept was a political concept that assumes equal rights for all citizens of Malaysia, regardless of ethnicity (Ishak, 2006). Other than the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept, the state introduced various national efforts such as 'Malaysia MADANI', '*Keluarga* Malaysia' (translated: Malaysian family), and '1Malaysia' to foster a collective identity of being Malaysian (Embong, 2021; Tan, 2010; Ishak, 2006). However, these efforts have been clouded by the *Ketuanan Melayu* concept.

The weakened status of the Malay sultanates and the ethnic-based economic activities combined with the Japanese encouragement for Malay nationalism fuelled the Malay community's desire for the dominance of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Rahim, Mustaffa, Ahmad & Lyndon, 2013). *Ketuanan Melayu* concept dictates that the Malay community has political supremacy over other ethnic communities in Malaysia. The *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (translated: King of Malaysia) is responsible for the safeguarding of the Malays' special position in Malaysia, and the implementation of *Bahasa* Malaysia and Islam as the state's official language and religion, respectively (Marzali, 2021; Ananth, 2018). The concept is protected by Article 153 of the Federal Constitution which states that the Malays have special rights above all other ethnic communities and the Sedition Act 1948 which prohibits speeches, actions, and/or publications that challenge the concept.

These privileges afforded to the Malay community have significantly affected the state's attempt to represent itself as a postcolonial state that embraces its culturally diverse society. This is likely why the union of cultures represented by the author's family remains a surprise to other Malaysians and those who understand the socio-political injustices that plague Malaysia as a state and society. In its efforts to repair the socioeconomic injustices and imagine its collective identity, the lived experiences of the non-Malay communities have been silenced.

Objectives and Overview of Article

Inspired by the conversations the author's family has had about its own cultural diversity, the author has adopted a social constructivist approach to understanding how Malaysia's past and collective identity shape and are shaped by the public sphere, specifically popular culture mediums. The paper includes a critical review of the History textbooks utilised in Malaysia's national education system as a backdrop to the emergence of popular culture mediums as public spheres for the Malaysian public to document the lived experiences of the non-Malay communities and reimagine what it means to be Malaysian. This is followed by a thematic analysis of three popular culture mediums: i) '*Pendatang'* on YouTube (Kuman Pictures, 2023), ii) '*Dari Dapur: Sambil Makan, Jadi Kawan'* (translated: From the Kitchen, We Build Friendships as We Eat) on YouTube (Dari Dapur, 2023a), and iii) '*Sang Kancil:* A Tale about How Ordinary Malaysians Defied the Odds', a non-fictional book (Chai, 2023). This analysis will highlight how the Malaysian public uses the public sphere as a site for social justice and reparation in the reimagination of what it means to be Malaysian.

Public Sphere as Sites of Public Pedagogy and Social Justice

Public spheres are theorised as imaginative social spaces where bourgeois society gathered to discuss matters of common interest (Habermas, 1991). This theory excluded the less powerful communities of society, but the emergence of popular culture media meant that these public spheres were reshaped into more accessible imaginative social spaces for the wider society (Bayly, 2004). Popular culture media is often perceived as contradictory to pedagogy. The latter is traditionally unencumbered by inequity and/or society's desire for social justice and reparation (Giroux & Simon, 1988). It assumes that schools are the sole sites of learning (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010). Conversely, popular culture media is a public sphere that invites the discourse of public pedagogy. The accessible, inclusive, and critical social agency elements of popular culture media, especially the Internet, invites the wider public to challenge the existing social injustices produced and distributed in pedagogy (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Ong, 2011; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Donatelli & Winthrop-Young, 1995).

The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported a significant increase in the Malaysian public's use of public spheres such as X and TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 14th and 15th General Election eras. The public used these imaginative social spaces to re-negotiate and reimagine the national narratives of Malaysia's past and collective identity during these periods because politicians tended to politicise Malaysia's multi-ethnic society during a crisis and election era (Meerangani, Hamid, Wahab, Satar & Martin, 2024; Pusat KOMAS, 2024; Pusat KOMAS, 2023). This led to the state's introduction of legislations and policies to curb the emerging racial and ethnic driven hate speeches and to protect Malaysia's social cohesion. However, some of the public argued that the state's increasingly stringent censorship of the public sphere is a disguise to preserve *Ketuanan Melayu* (Meerangani, Hamid, Wahab, Satar & Martin, 2024; KOMAS, 2023; Jalli, Joharry & Salleh, 2022). This example demonstrates that though the public sphere is not restricted by the legislation and policies of a state, it is shaped by the state's sociocultural limitations. Malaysia's censorship laws, such as the Online Safety Bill 2024, the Film Censorship 2002, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and the Sedition Act 1948, undermine the open and democratic nature of public spheres. These laws continue to promote a national narrative that Malaysia is a postcolonial multi-ethnic state that successfully overcame its colonial woes by embracing its culturally diverse society.

Therefore, the next section is a description of the methodology adopted by the author to demonstrate how the public sphere, specifically popular culture media, challenges the existing narrative of Malaysia's past and collective identity as documented in its History textbooks.

Methodology

The author chose to do a critical review of the History textbooks utilised in Malaysia's national education system because all school-going children are required to pass History to graduate secondary school (Shatir & Hamzah, 2021). Additionally, the state's philosophy for History Education is to cultivate the spirit of loyalty towards the nation and to instil a sense of pride to be Malaysians among students (Ahmad, Rahim, Seman & Salleh, 2010). Hence, the author believes that these History textbooks are a good medium to illustrate how the Malaysian state uses media to shape its collective identity and past.

The author also chose to employ a thematic analysis to build a framework of how the Malaysian public uses popular culture mediums to challenge the national narrative of Malaysia's past and collective identity as written in its History textbooks. Moreover, this form of analysis lends itself to the social constructivist approach which supports the author's notion that social objects such as media, the past, and collective identity do not exist in isolation. Instead, media mediates which

aspects of the past are made visible and invisible in the imagination of a collective identity. Likewise, the collective identity and national narration of the past reflect how a state or society wishes to represent themselves to others, in the media. The three primary sources analysed are '*Pendatang'* - Malaysia's first crowdfunded film released on YouTube, '*Dari Dapur: Sambil Makan, Jadi Kawan'* - a collaborative documentary film also released on YouTube, and '*Sang Kancil*: A Tale about How Ordinary Malaysians Defied the Odds' - an indie non-fictional book about Malaysia's underdogs. These sources were selected because of their use of public spheres to collaborate with the silenced communities of Malaysia and challenge the *Ketuanan Melayu* concept that restricts the narration of Malaysia's past and collective identity as a postcolonial multiethnic state that truly embraces its culturally diverse society.

The analysis of these primary sources and the History textbooks will provide a nuanced view of Malaysia's media landscape and its relation to the imagination of its past and collective identity, to an international audience of public pedagogy scholars.

Critical Review of Malaysia's History Textbooks

It is traditionally assumed that pedagogy is an objective and neutral educational journey, untainted by the social, political and/or economic context of a state (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Giroux & Simon, 1988). However, education systems around the world including Malaysia are shaped by their respective states. Substantial exploratory research into how the Malaysian state uses various mediums such as History textbooks, public architecture, national festivals, and museums to frame its collective identity and past, and how the public receives these imaginaries have been conducted. The research includes Tajuddin, Collie and Zhu (2017), Chang and Kho (2017), and Baba Zain (2016) who concluded that the state actively attempts to promote a collective identity that embraces Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, but the Malaysian public receives these as contradictory to the state's policies and discourses such as the *Ketuanan Melayu* concept and affirmative action policies which treat its society based on ethnicity (Chin 2022; Liow, 2015; Embong, 2002). The state's philosophy for History Education implies that the purpose of studying History in Malaysia's national education system is to foster civic nationalism and shape students' identity and relationship with the state, rather than to develop students' historical thinking and literacy skills.

This is reflected in recent editions of the History textbooks that received significant backlash from professional historians and the broader Malaysian public. Professional local historians, Dr Arifin and Dr Maiddin observed that the 1824 Pangkor Treaty in Perak was incorrectly documented in the History textbooks with poorly cited primary sources that contradict extensive foreign records (Ajos, 2024). Moreover, students are expected to accept historical information as fact, at face value, with no allowance for debate or discussion (Ajos, 2024; Ahmad, Rahim, Seman & Salleh, 2010). This does not reflect the dynamic reality of History as a field of study (Shatir & Hamzah, 2021).

The second feedback is the textbooks' Malay and Islamic centric narration of Malaysia's past (Ariff, 2021a; Malhi, 2021a; FMT Reporters, 2021). The 2016 edition of the Form 1 (equivalent to the first year of secondary school) textbook wherein the establishment of the Indus and Hwang Ho civilisations were reduced to ten pages each while the founding of the Islamic civilisation was at least 26 pages (Dzulkifly, 2022b; Malhi, 2021b). Additionally, the 1996 edition of the Form 2 textbook included a detailed account of the roles that the Chinese and Indian communities played. The Chinese community was recognised as the key entrepreneurs and businessmen of the 19th century *Tanah Melayu*'s tin mining industry. The Indian community was widely recognised for their role in the development of *Tanah Melayu*'s physical infrastructures such as roads, railways, trading ports, and others. However, the latest editions of the textbooks relegated the involvement of the Indian and Chinese communities to two or three sentences only (Malhi, 2021a; Ariff, 2021b). The

absence of the Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians contradicts the state's philosophical approach for History Education. Moreover, the use of the term 'contribution' in the History textbooks alludes to a passive way of remembering the communities of a nation. A collaborative effort to document the lived experiences and collective memories of the Chinese and Indian communities is a more constructive reparative approach in re-telling the past.

The inaccurate imagination of Malaysia's past in its national History textbooks is reminiscent of colonial approaches to historical knowledge: the intentional silencing of communities that are less powerful for the betterment of one ethnic community. Not only were the Chinese and Indian communities absent from these national print mediums, but the state's decision to equate the origins of Malaysia to the *Kesultanan Melayu Melaka* (translated: the Malacca Sultanate) is an indicator of the state's decision to silence the true people of the land – the *Orang Asli* (translated: native people) of Peninsular Malaysia and the *Orang Asal* (translated: original people) of East Malaysia (Shatir & Hamzah, 2021; KemSMS Sabah & Sarawak, 2011). The recent revision of these History textbooks supports public pedagogy scholars who posited that the pedagogical sphere is politically, morally, and/or socially motivated (Charman & Dixon, 2024; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010; Freire, 1970).

This brief but critical review of the History textbooks demonstrates the Malaysian state's intent to cultivate a 'Malay'-sian, not a 'Malaysian' collective identity. This contradicts the leaders of the state's attempt to unify the communities of Malaysia, but it is familiar within the global context of populist nationalism wherein media is mobilised to actively exclude communities that do not fit the constructed homogenous collective identity.

Thematic Analysis of Malaysia's Hidden Histories

The story of migration in Malaysia's state endorsed or owned mediums, specifically the national History textbooks, focus on the migration of the Chinese and Indian communities during the British colonial era of *Tanah Melayu.* Although most individuals from these communities and their descendants are now recognised as legal residents and citizens of the state, many Malay politicians continue to refer to them as *pendatang* who should return to their homeland; China and India, respectively (Pusat KOMAS, 2023). This divide between ethnic communities into a national in-group and out-group or the excluded, is common to global populist nationalism.

The social construction of a national identity can be explicitly linked to Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (1979). Tajfel and Turner posited that postcolonial states often form distinctive boundaries within their nations during the nation-building process (Larson, 2022; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Some nation-states like Singapore enhance the perceived hierarchy of ethnic identities introduced by the British (Reddy & Gleibs, 2019). Others, like Hong Kong, form a distinct local national and political identity that is neither British nor mainland China (Tang, Hung & Ho, 2022). The state of Malaysia maintains that it emphasises the value of national unity based on multiculturalism, but the state actively reinforces the ethnic distinction constructed during its colonial era (Nair, 1999). This is evident in the political bastardisation of the term *pendatang* in state endorsed or owned mediums. The term *pendatang* was a neutral term that meant an unfamiliar individual(s) who may or may not share the same religion or ethnic background as the dominant community and had no loyalty to a state or nation (New Naratif, 2019). However, Malaysia's continuous efforts to preserve *Ketuanan Melayu* perpetuated the national in-group and out-group based on ethnicity introduced by the British (Chin, 2022; Liow, 2015; Nair, 1999).

The ideas of *pendatang* are explored and challenged in the first two hidden histories while the third uncovers the lived experiences of individuals and communities that have been silenced to maintain the *Ketuanan Melayu* and national in-group and out-group dichotomy.

Hidden Histories 1: '*Pendatang*'

'*Pendatang*' is a thriller set in a nightmarish future that deals with racial extremism in a multi-ethnic society. A Chinese family is relocated to a wooden house previously owned by a Malay family, in a rural area known as Area 401(c) because of a traffic offence. The family is greeted by an all-Chinese Self-Defence Team who reminds the family to abide by the Segregation Act. The Act reads "any contact with a race other than one's own is deemed detrimental to the harmony and stability of the federation ... any person who does or attempts to do, or conspires with any person to harbour a person other than one's own race, shall be guilty of an offense and shall upon conviction, be liable for imprisonment for a term not less than 25 years." As the family settles into their new home that is filled with furniture and memories of its previous owners, they are startled by the presence of a *pendatang* – a young Malay girl whom they find hiding in their attic (Kuman Pictures, 2023).

This introductory scene sets the stage for a dystopian reality where the characters struggle with the outcome of a state-wide vote where 79% of the society voted 'yes' to a segregated system, and the actuality of being a *pendatang*. The father, who voted 'yes' is adamant to turn the young girl in to the Self-Defence Team while the mother and children insist on protecting the young girl because "if you report her, she'll be as good as dead," exclaimed the mother. The film follows the family's struggle to be good members of society and get rid of the *pendatang* or to smuggle her to safety (Kuman Pictures, 2023).

Within 17 hours of the film's premiere on YouTube, the film garnered 100,000 views (Aziz, 2023). Unlike the national History textbooks, the democratic and interactive nature of YouTube provided the audience with an unprohibited opportunity to share their critical feedback and observations about the film, the notion of *pendatang,* and the *Ketuanan Melayu* concept.

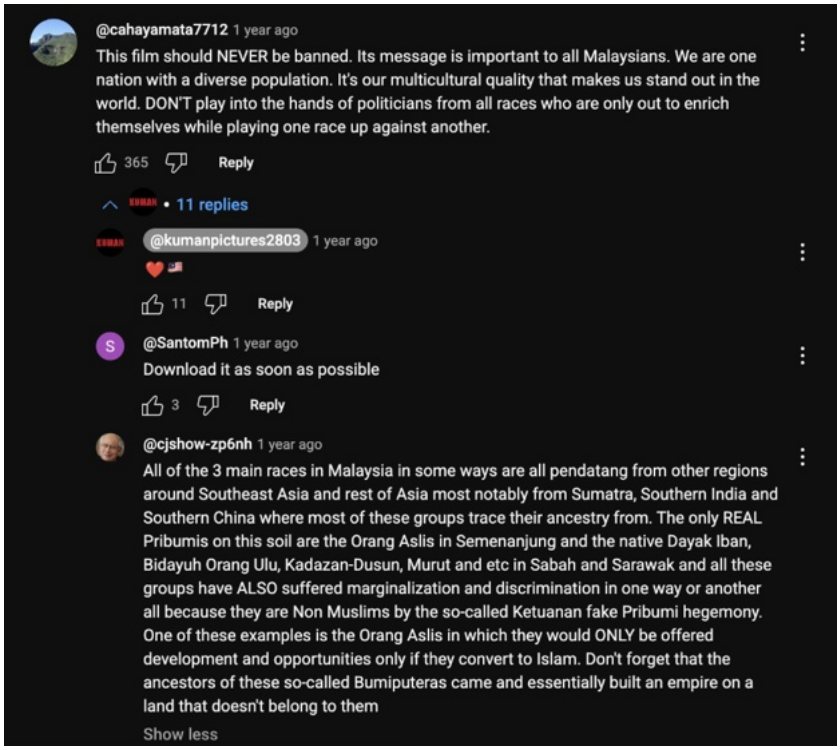


Figure 1: A snapshot of a conversation between the film's audience about the notion of *pendatang* and Malaysia's multiethnic society (Kuman Pictures, 2023).

The film was inspired by the 2015 Rohingya crisis wherein the Malaysian state was widely criticised by UNHCR and other international human rights organisations for turning away thousands of Rohingya people who were then left stranded at sea (Shukri, 2021). Director Ng Ken Kin and Scriptwriter Lim Boon Sian emphasised the value of storytelling through public spheres like YouTube where state censorship is limited or non-existent (INTI, 2024; Frater, 2024). Founder of Kuman Pictures, Amir Muhammad added "our goal was simple – to create the film without sacrificing its essence and to share it freely," (INTI, 2024). The Malaysian film industry has, in recent years, faced increased censorship by the state with the introduction of new national guidelines that are more pro-Islamic (Frater, 2024). The gravitation toward religious foundations is not unique to Malaysia. Postcolonial societies like Turkiye and Indonesia are also embracing their Islamic roots in their populist nationalism (Kuru, 2024). Aware that the film would not be approved by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board because of its racial and ethnic content, the *Pendatang* production team leveraged on the open and democratic nature of public spheres like YouTube – a freely accessible platform to anyone with Internet connection (FMT Reporters, 2024).

Although it was a risky and unprofitable experiment, the film's comment section demonstrates the value of digital public spheres like YouTube. The digital nature of such public spheres creates an imaginative social space that transcends geographical boundaries and encourages its audience to reflect on what would happen to Malaysia's collective identity if resentment between ethnic communities was left unchecked.

Hidden Histories 2: 'Dari Dapur: Sambil Makan, Jadi Kawan'

'*Dari Dapur*' is an eight-episode documentary film by untitled kompeni, in partnership with the Fourth and Refuge for the Refugees (Dari Dapur, 2023a). The premise of this documentary film is simple: local influencers, activists, and politicians share a home-cooked meal with a migrant or displaced family as the latter share their lived experiences in Malaysia (OHCHR, 2024; BFM 89,9, 2023). Migration is a complicated and often abstract issue for many Malaysians. The existing narratives on migration in Malaysia assumes that Malaysians and the *pendatang* community like the migrant workers and displaced live parallel lives and have nothing in common. The '*Dari Dapur*' team agreed that the immersive nature of storytelling was a good way to cut through the complexity of existing narratives, to move beyond the quantitative data and click-bait headlines, and to reimagine Malaysia's narrative on migration (OHCHR, 2024; Shi & Cheung, 2024).

Malaysian comedian Kevin Jay met Liza, a Cambodian migrant worker who left home for Malaysia, to earn a better living. However, the COVID-19 pandemic left her stuck in Malaysia longer than expected and is now unable to afford the documents and flight ticket home. Jay shared that he resonated with Liza's lived experience as it reminded him of his grandparents who left Pakistan for Malaysia, in search of a better life. He shared "whether you're Malay, Chinese, or Indian, everyone has a migration story," (Dari Dapur, 2023a). Renowned educator Samuel Isaiah shared a similar story in Episode 3 of the film, where he met James, a Kachin refugee. Isaiah shared that his grandmother was born and lived in Myanmar for at least 15 years before moving to Malaysia as her father was in the British Army. Isaiah's story resonated with James who had family in the British Army as well (Dari Dapur, 2023c). Malaysia's Chef Wan also shared "whether you realise it or not, at one point of our life or our family's life, we were migrants. The world today is formed through migration – we can't run away from it," (Dari Dapur, 2023b). Each of these Malaysian individuals remind the public that though the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities are legal residents of the state, Malaysia is a new state whose society originated from elsewhere including Nusantara, China, and India. The lived experiences captured in this documentary film adds heart

and humanity to the statistics and click-bait narratives Malaysians are accustomed to. It reminds the public that the lives of Malaysians are not as dissimilar from the *pendatang* community.

Episode 7 featured Rohon and his family who fled Myanmar, Melisa Idris; a broadcast journalist with Astro Awani, and American Ambassador; Brian D. McFeeters. Rohon and McFeeters discussed the significant increase in xenophobia in digital public spheres such as X, Facebook, and TikTok since the COVID-19 pandemic, especially towards the displaced amongst Malaysians. Idris added that media has played a significant role in "othering the refugees, normalising hate, in sowing the division," (Dari Dapur, 2023d). The conversation between Rohon and McFeeters, and Idris's comment supports MCMC and Pusat KOMAS's observation that the accessible and democratic nature of public spheres especially Facebook, X, and TikTok invite the public to perpetuate the narrative that the *pendatang* community is dangerous. Although these xenophobic and discriminatory expressions have the potential to cause social disharmony within Malaysia's society, the state remains impartial or silent about it because these hate speeches do not infringe on *Ketuanan Melayu*.

Hidden Histories 3: *Sang Kancil*: A Tale about How Ordinary Malaysians Defied the Odds

Written by James Chai, *Sang Kancil* is a compilation of seven essays about silenced individuals and communities who played a significant role in the social transformation of Malaysia. Chai used the mousedeer, *sang kancil* – an animal famous in Malaysian folklore for triumphing in its battles against larger animals – as a metaphor to encourage his readers to rethink how social transformation can begin with the silenced (Davidson, 2024; Chai, 2023). Collectivist societies like Malaysia, China, and Hong Kong are restrained in their actions and reactions against the state especially as the culture of respect for hierarchy and authority are deeply rooted in the society's heritage. China's state-owned mediums consistently use a media framing technique known as the protest paradigm to frame protestors and their grievances as violent and chaotic acts orchestrated by outsiders who seek to disrupt the social cohesion and stability of its state. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the 2019 Hong Kong protests are two examples of how the Chinese state employed the protest paradigm against the ordinary people seeking social transformation (China Media Project, 2023; Amnesty International, 2019; BBC News, 2014).

The oral accounts recorded in Chai's non-fiction research-back book is another indicator of the Malaysian public's increased dissatisfaction with the social injustices experienced by the silenced communities. These stories are also a firm reminder of what remains excluded from the national narratives of Malaysia's past including its History textbooks.

Aunty Bersih

Malaysia maintained its stability for 61 years with Barisan Nasional in power. However, the supposedly multiethnic political coalition was dominated by a pro-Malay political party; UMNO (Chin, 2022). Barisan Nasional's dominance is a result of years of electoral corruption, gerrymandering, and malapportionment including "the oldest voter in the world, born in 1897 was found alive on the electoral roll; 500,000 voters shared the same addresses; 2,000,000 voters had no address... mysterious power outages occurred during vote counting... cash was traded for votes," (Chai, 2023, p.19).

Aunty *Bersih*'s story is about a 64-year-old Malaysian Chinese teacher who joined the largest protest in Malaysian history; *Bersih* (translated: The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) to fight for free and fair elections in Malaysia (Chai, 2023). Aunty *Bersih*'s lived experience is historic for two reasons. The first is that the *Bersih* movement led to a historical election in 2018 which saw a fair and clean election of a new political coalition; Pakatan Harapan – a coalition that better represented the multi-ethnic landscape of Malaysia's society (Khoo, 2024; Khoo, 2021). The second reason is

that Aunty *Bersih*'s story reminds Malaysians of another significant protest; 13 May. 13 May is the infamous bloodstain moment in Malaysia's past where approximately 200 people were killed following the emergence of Chinese-supported opposition parties in the then General Election (Latiff & Chu, 2022). Despite the historic nature of both 13 May and Aunty *Bersih*'s lived experience, neither are included in the national narrative of Malaysia's past including the History textbooks. The Barisan Nasional and pro-state mediums accused the *Bersih* organisers and protestors of attempting to destabilise the social cohesion and political stability of Malaysia (Smeltzer & Pare, 2015). The decision to omit both protests and the lived experiences of those involved is an indicator that the past is subjected to a political, social, and/or moral agenda specifically *Ketuanan Melayu*.

Fahmi Reza

In 2016, former Prime Minister Najib Razak was charged with five counts of violation of Section 23(1) of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009 (Chai, 2023). This incident is now infamously known as the 1MDB scandal. Frustrated with political corruption and scandal caused by former Prime Minister Najib Razak, Fahmi Reza drew the now infamous 'Clown Face' and posted it on X with a caption that read "In 2015, the Sedition Act was used 91 times. But in a country full of corruption, we are all seditious (translated)."



Figure 2: The infamous post by Fahmi Reza, on X (@kuasasiswa, 2016).

Within 166 minutes, the Police Cyber Investigation Response (PCIRC) issued a warning: 'your account is under PDRM's (translated: Royal Malaysia Police) watch. Use it wisely and in accordance to the law' (Chai, 2023). Reza who is no stranger to threats and abuse of power by the Malaysian state and police, chose to repost the PCIRC's warning on X with a caption that read: 'in a country that uses its laws to protect the corruptor, it's about time we are no longer polite in fighting against corrupt authorities' (Chai, 2023). Despite efforts from the state to sanitise former Prime Minister Najib Razak's image as that of a modern, clean, and moderate leader, Reza's 'Clown Face' artwork and use of the public sphere, X caused a Streisand Effect. The state's continuous efforts to censor and silence Reza only made Reza's political artwork more popular with the Malaysian and international public(s). International media such as BBC, Al Jazeera, and The Wall Street Journal began covering Reza's 'Clown Face' and unearthed the political rebellion behind his artwork (Chai, 2023).

Although this lived experience of Reza documented by Chai does not challenge the existing narrative of Malaysia's past and collective identity, it illustrates the power of public spheres as imaginative social spaces to challenge the political and social injustices that corrupt a state. Chai wrote *Sang Kancil* to emphasise the power of the ordinary and silenced people in creating a snowball effect of social transformation in a collectivist society like Malaysia. The book also amplified the oral accounts of these individuals and communities and demonstrated how public spheres have the potential to counter the narratives written by state endorsed and owned mediums.

Conclusion

The analysis of '*Pendatang', 'Dari Dapur'*, and '*Sang Kancil'* emphasised three key findings about how public spheres shape and are shaped by a state's past and collective identity. First, digital public spheres like YouTube and X provide imaginative spaces that are above the censorship laws of a state, for the public to tell their lived experiences. Secondly, the analysis underlines the power of public spheres in shaping a state's collective identity and past. Power is afforded to those silenced to imagine their past and identities, in relation to their state. Lastly, the public spheres are mediums for reparation through collaboration. '*Pendatang', 'Dari Dapur',* and '*Sang Kancil'* were produced through collaborations between the silenced and powerful to challenge the state's imagination of *Bangsa Malaysia.* These findings suggest that public spheres are valuable in socio-political contexts wherein the state actively silences the lived experiences of some of its ethnic communities. It also allows for families, like the author's, to be less of an anomaly especially for Malaysia, a postcolonial multi-ethnic society that supposedly overcame its colonial woes.

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