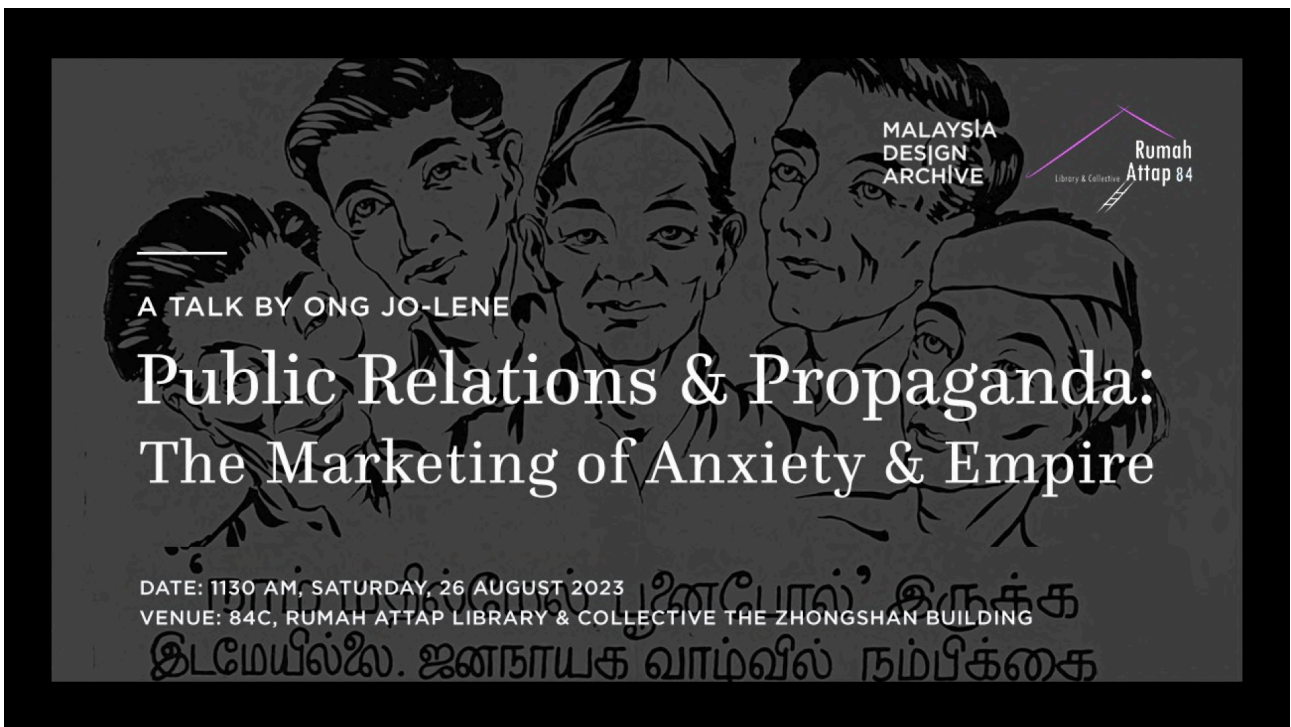


Project Story

In 2023, while I was on a 3-month residency in Delfina Foundation, London, I visited the National Archives UK in Kew in search of cities in China where Malayan Communists, like my paternal grandfather, may have been deported. A search using "Malayan Emergency" returned 58 records. I did not find what I was looking for but came across reams of files detailing the Colonial Office's Malayan Emergency publicity and propaganda operations. Moved by the anger of seeing images of dead bodies of countless Malaysians used as 'effective' visual material, the 16 million propaganda leaflets printed in a single year, the creation of the term 'bandit' and 'terrorist' to justify extrajudicial punishment, the use of design wireframes and other advanced public relations tools to sway public opinion, and how the colonial strategies that prey on racial differences live on in Malaysia's present-day racial prejudices, I felt compelled to share what I had found with other Malaysians. I approached Malaysia Design Archive to host my presentation "Public Relations & Propaganda: The Marketing of Anxiety & Empire." The event made me realise that there is a strong desire in young Malaysians to recover fragmented family history and understand how it intersects with collective trauma.



As luck would have it, a month later, the British Council CTC grant cycle opened up. During the time I was in London, two mutual friends recommended that I visit Michelle Williams Gamaker's solo exhibition, *Our Mountains Are Painted on Glass* at the South London Gallery. It premiered her new film work, titled *Thieves*, a remake of a Hollywood classic film that stages a 'fictional revenge' in which previously marginalised characters claim leading roles. Together with our mutual friend Sabine Groenewegen, a visual artist and filmmaker whose works addresses the gaps in archives,

we developed the idea for *CounterArchive: Fictional Healing Collective Filmmaking Lab* - to experiment with film and fiction's potential as form of reparation, to produce a 'mother film' that could seed other projects by lab participants and beyond.

Day 1 started with with a round of brief self-introductions and Jo-Lene introducing the archival materials from National Archives UK as well as its gaps and omissions. This was followed by our first collective activity that also served as an icebreaker — building our own post-it notes timeline of the Malayan Emergency that is loosely chronological, broadly encompassing small stories of lives swept under the weight of History, and subjectively including our own emotions. This was followed by the presentations that introduced the framework of the workshop — Michelle presented approaches she calls *fictional activism*, *fictional revenge*, and *fictional healing*, and Sabine shared about how she voices the absences in archives. The violence of the archive and its fictions were further addressed by presentations from several participants including Ben Yau who delivered a lecture performance on Operation Legacy, a British Colonial Office programme to destroy files that would implicate the British Empire in wrongdoing; Ali Alasri who shared about his art project *Belas Masa*, an act of remembering May 13 through inherited fragmented memories and documents; Yvonne Tan shared her research *Food in the Counterinsurgency of the Malayan Emergency: Security, Hawking, and Food Denial*, and Yap Sau Bin who shared recently discovered letter press blocks from his late grandfather's printing foundry that reveal possible covert involvement in the communist independence movement.



On Day 2, we carefully leafed the two reams of the archival materials in MDA's collection copied from the National Archives UK to find protagonists that exist in the silence. After that we returned to our collective timeline, taking turns to read the notes, and channel our protagonists into existence. With the expressive voice of experienced actor in our group, Ali, the reading took a performative turn that prepared us for the next phase of work of writing scenes. We broke out into smaller groups to develop eight different stories. These were further developed into eight different plots written and directed by Eddie Wong, Ben Yau, Dahong Hongxuan Wang, Michelle Williams Gamaker, Sabine Groenewegen, and Julien Chen. At the same time, Eddie managed to source costumes for a 1950s setting and Jo-Lene obtained permission to shoot in KongsikL and Sekeping Tenggara.



On Day 3, we were shooting with Yih Wen Chen and Joshua Kok generously lending us their cameras and lights while acting as DOP and camera operators. Sabine was in charge of collecting and organising the raw footage, Michelle overseeing set and direction, while Jo-Lene managed the production. Everyone played a role and swapped roles when needed — cast, props, costumes, catering, assisting, driving, offering valuable opinions, and moral support. We started at KongsikL where we shot 4 scenes and moved to Sekeping Tenggara where we shot another 4 scenes. By the end of the day, we were absolutely drained and exhausted but proud of what we had achieved and how we achieved it through collective spirit! We celebrated our collective

filmmaking lab together with Rebecca Yeoh and Ezrena Marwan of Malaysia Design Archive with a customary cast and crew dinner.

In 3 days, *CounterArchive: Collective Filmmaking Lab 2024* [Ali Alasri, Kevin Bathman, Julien Chen, Yih-Wen Chen, Sabine Groenewegen, Jakob van Klang, Joshua Kok, Anthony Ngoya, Ong Jo-Lene, Yvonne Tan, Xu Jen Teo, Dahong Hongxuan Wang, Michelle Williams Gamaker, Eddie Wong, Saubin Yap, Ben Yau] developed and shot a short film. The raw footage is now awaiting the next phase - post-production!



Six months later, we reconvened for the first time during our hybrid sharing and screening session at Gasworks, London. During this event, the facilitators introduced the project before screening first cuts of vignettes directed by Dahong Hongxuan Wang and Eddie Wong, who used their own time and equipment after the workshop to edit the footage. After that, participants in KL and China joined us via Google Meets to share their experiences. Julien Chen shared that before this workshop, he didn't see the value of his grandmother's stories but now he sees the importance of documenting this oral history. He then shared a video interview with his grandmother detailing life in New Village internment camps during the Malayan Emergency. Eddie Wong is an award winning artist who has been recognised for his work using artificial intelligence to imagine ancestral memory and family history fragmented by the Malayan Emergency shared that the workshop opened up new ways of working with the speculative as a form of reparation. Even though we were not all physically in the same space, we immediately felt the collective spirit of the group.



CounterArchive: Fictional Healing Collective Filmmaking Lab 2024

[Ali Alasri, Kevin Bathman, Julien Chen, Yih-Wen Chen, Sabine Groenewegen, Jakob van Klang, Joshua Kok, Anthony Ngoya, Ong Jo-Lene, Yvonne Tan, Xu Jen Teo, Dahong Hongxuan Wang, Michelle Williams Gamaker, Eddie Wong, Saubin Yap, Ben Yau]

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