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Imagining hybrid cosmopolitan Malaysia through Chinese kung fu comedies: Nasi Lemak 2.0 (2011) and Petaling Street Warriors (2011)

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Imagining hybrid cosmopolitan Malaysia through Chinese kung fu comedies: *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) and *Petaling Street Warriors* (2011)

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This article focuses on two Malaysian nonsensical kung fu comedies, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Namewee, 2011) and *Petaling Street Warriors* (James Lee, 2011), that might be regarded as quirky, slightly off-kilter Chinese genre films for their multilingual and multi-ethnic casting. But these films are culturally and geographically rooted in the specificities of contemporary Malaysian politics. Using Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia to enable a richer reading of these films that deploy an ostensibly 'Chinese' genre made universal by Stephen Chow Sing-Chi, I demonstrate how the 'imagined community' envisioned in these two films is hybrid, cosmopolitan and subverts racialized Malaysian identities. Such a reading serves to counter certain expectations of a monologic global style of kung fu film. By emphasizing such localized particularities and difference, these Malaysian Chinese films provide instances of 'accented cinema' that constantly problematize the homogenizing tendency of perceiving them as universal products.

Keywords: heteroglossic film; nonsensical kung fu comedy; Malaysian independent films; accented cinema; Namewee

This article discusses how two contemporary independent Chinese Malaysian films, *Petaling Street Warriors* (dir. James Lee, 2011) and *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (dir. Wee Meng Chee, 2011) deploy the genre of kung fu nonsensical comedy to reach out to a mainstream audience with their political messages. Lee's film reflects Malaya (an allegory about contemporary Malaysia) as a place of self-actualization and migrant homemaking for its ethnic Chinese and Indian characters, while debut filmmaker Wee's anti-racist message supports Malaysia's multicultural diversity. The nonsensical (*moleitau*) comedy popularized by Stephen Chow Sing-Chi in *God of Cookery* (1996) and *Kung fu Hustle*, both of whose influences are reflected in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* and *Petaling Street Warriors*, is a flexible and multilayered genre that lends itself easily to satire and nonsensical wordplay. Its broad comedic aspects make the more serious issues lighter, if not more palatable to audiences, while also serving to distract the censors. As Steve Neale reminds us, genres set up specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves in the course of the viewing process (2004, 158). In many ways, these two films exceed or supplement the viewer expectations of the kung fu nonsensical comedy genre because of their patriotic agenda.

In this article, I want to demonstrate how the clever adaptation of the genre allows us to read the films through Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in both the linguistic and social-political senses. I use Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* to call for a richer, less lazy reading of films, one that recognizes 'the social life of discourse' and that roots 'the

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artist's individual creative powers' to the social context and ideology that frames his/her acts of production, in order to re-energize the act of reception (Bakhtin 1981, 269). Deploying Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, I make two points: one, to argue that these two filmmakers conceive of the 'imagined community' of Malaysia as a hybrid cosmopolitan[1] one that subverts and deconstructs racialized conceptions; and two, to counter some film viewers' longing for and expectations of a monologic style of kung fu film, one that is less local and more global/universal or, to put it in another way, one that is less Malaysian and more Chinese (see Gaultier 2011; How 2012). In doing so, I am not implying that the *moleitau* comedy, especially Chow's, is not already heteroglossic in the linguistic and social-political senses. I am aware that Chow plays with language – going between Cantonese and Mandarin and English – and genre (in *Kung fu Hustle*) to make a point about the present-day relations between mainland China, Hong Kong and Hollywood (Szeto 2007). Additionally, because the *moleitau* derives its humour from the Cantonese vernacular, it is considered highly culturally specific (Bettinson 2012, 8). But language aside, because comedy is so uniquely local in the first place, the *mouleitau* as 'the quaint essential Hong Kong genre' is thought to be less culturally transferrable than kung fu movies, melodramas and thrillers (Chan 1997, 190). Even Chow himself acknowledged that the genre's localization posed a limit to transnational audiences and claimed he had to balance the verbal jokes with visual elements to attract a global audience in *Kung Fu Hustle* (Szeto 2007). Similarly, Malaysian film reviewer 'How' worries that the use of a hybrid language that combines Mandarin, Hokkien, English, Malay and Tamil and references to Malaysian politics might alienate non-Malaysian audiences. Indonesian film blogger 'Leon Gaultier' goes further, giving the film 1.5 stars out of five. To paraphrase Gaultier, the humour was at times forced and not funny, unlike Hong Kong kung fu comedies that are more universal (2011). These fears are understandable for although the target audience is predominantly Malaysian and the films circulated in Singapore and to the Malaysian diaspora overseas and a few minor film festivals outside the region, DVDs available for purchase online and free downloads have made these films accessible to a global audience. I will show how an ostensibly 'Hong Kong' genre – the kung fu *moleitau* comedy – is localized through intertextual references to the contemporary Malaysian politics of race and multiculturalism, and subject to heteroglossic play by these two filmmakers.

Finally, I argue that these films, when read as heteroglossic film texts, offer a richer understanding of local identity politics by providing perspectives about the role, contribution and attitudes of Chinese Malaysians towards ethnicity, the nation and Malaysian citizenship today. Through their emphases on such localized particularities and difference, these Malaysian Chinese films are instances of 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001) that constantly problematize the homogenizing tendency of perceiving them as universal products. 'Accented cinema' refers to films made by diasporic, exilic and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers, although '[d]iasporized filmmakers tend to be centered less than the exiled filmmakers on a cathected relationship with a single homeland and on a claim that they represent it and its people'. As a result, diasporic films are 'accented more fully than those of the exiles by the plurality and performativity of identity' (Naficy 2001, 14). At the same time, these two Malaysian films provide a minoritarian perspective on 'the dynamics of assimilation and resistance' (8).

But first, the pro-multicultural positions both films adopt are to be distinguished from Prime Minister Najib Razak's '1Malaysia' programme and the common state-sponsored forms of multiculturalism that tokenize and celebrate images of cultural diversity for global consumption. In Peninsular Malaysia – partly due to the intensified discourse in

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the media on race and religious politics; the impact of incidents that have occurred since 2008, including arson attacks on places of worship; public debate over racist representations in school textbooks; and controversial statements by public personalities – ethnic relations have become strained and rived by distrust (Merdeka Center for Opinion Research 2011). As a response to worsening ethnic relations, the 'One Malaysia' ('Satu 1 Malaysia' in Malay) programme was launched in September 2010 emphasizing ethnic harmony, national unity and efficient governance. However, the unity slogan rings hollow in light of Najib's failure to prevent those within his party from uttering racist statements and, when deemed politically necessary, playing the racist card himself.[2] Set within this context, the films' representations of 'quotidian transversality' (Wise 2009) signal an active rejection of racialized discourse from ethnic chauvinists – of Malay primacy (*ketuanan Melayu*) and its corollary response, a sense of cultural superiority on the part of ethnic Chinese Malaysians. *Ketuanan Melayu* is manifested in the affirmative action policies for ethnic Malays who make up more than half the population and are accorded *bumiputera* (lit. sons of the soil) status and justified under the New Economic Policy (NEP 1971–1990, installed after the 1969 so-called 'race riots' between the Malays and Chinese) and subsequent policies that continued to privilege Malays through a quota system for placements in public universities, employment and so on. Ethnic minority Chinese (24.6%),[3] forced to compete with other minorities for a handful of positions in the civil service and public universities and in overseas universities, may in retrospect feel that their experience has made them stronger and more globally competitive compared to their Malay counterparts, who have a 'subsidy mentality' (Ng 2002) and putatively have not succeeded on the basis of merit or hard work.

Film synopses and directors' backgrounds

Nasi Lemak 2.0's premise resembles that of Stephen Chow's *God of Cookery*: an arrogant uncompromising chef, played by the filmmaker himself, believes that Chinese cuisine is the best in the world. Broke and with his restaurant a failure, he is coaxed into taking part in a cooking competition to help a young woman, Xiao K, regain her father's restaurant from her greedy aunt. One day Chef Huang tastes some delicious nasi lemak (coconut rice) from the stall of a Malay woman whom he had earlier insulted. Contrite and inspired, he sets out on a journey with Xiao K to learn how to make the best nasi lemak, claimed to be the national dish, from the various ethnic communities. On the way, he learns to overcome his racism and sinocentrism and to embrace a multicultural Malaysian identity, cooking nasi lemak for the 'best Chinese rice dish' competition. This fictional narrative could be said to mirror the director's own very public biography. Namewee, a.k.a. Wee Meng Chee, was a Malaysian student studying communications at a Taiwanese university in 2007 when he released on YouTube a controversial Chinese rap version of the national anthem 'Negarakuku' (My Negaraku) that pointed out the problems in Malaysia. He was accused of insulting Islam and Muslims and eventually issued a public apology, which was rejected by the Cabinet. The song brought him a notoriety that has haunted his career. This film is an independent effort to embrace Malaysia's ethnic diversity and encapsulates Prime Minister Najib Razak's 1Malaysia policy about national unity. Interviews with Namewee suggest that the film is his way of redeeming himself and demonstrating his patriotism (*Malaysiakini* 2011). One may read Namewee's insistence on using the '1Malaysia' label as a form of populist reclamation or civic appropriation of the state slogan to describe a more grassroots type of multiculturalism. The concluding rap song, 'Rasa Sayang', even encourages Malaysians overseas to return to Malaysia: 'No matter what, always remember

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your way home. The tastiest meal is sharing it with your own family!' Its message echoes the Najib government's attempt to address the brain drain problem with the Returning Expert Programme, a programme to incentivize talented and highly skilled Malaysians overseas to return to work and live in Malaysia.[4]

Petaling Street Warriors revolves around Du Yao, an ordinary Hokkien mee[5] seller in Petaling Street in 1908 who finds out through a series of events that he is the descendant of the deposed Chinese Emperor, Jian Wen, rumoured to have fled to Southeast Asia in 1409. Unbeknownst to him, Du Yao is protected by his wife Li Chun (played by Yeo Yann Yann), her cousin Liu Kun (Namewee), a Hakka who works milling tapioca flour, and the coffee seller (Sunny Pang) who all secretly have martial arts skills. Du Yao has to contend with extortion from local gangs, a corrupt British official, an imperial eunuch from China who is looking for the lost treasure of Jian Wen and a seductive Japanese woman spy (Chris Tong) also in search of the same treasure. When his wife gets kidnapped by the eunuch, Du Yao has to prove his manhood and save her using his wit and with the help of some mystical transference of power (*chi*) from his brother-in-law (Singaporean actor-director Jack Neo in drag). The film concludes with Du Yao expressing no interest in upholding his royal lineage and choosing instead the destiny of the immigrant who starts life anew, from the bottom up.

As a mainstream genre, the nonsensical kung fu comedy offers independent Malaysian filmmakers an opportunity to widen their address and to deliver a serious message through humour and satire. *Warriors* is the first Chinese-language mainstream film of mostly independent digital filmmaker James Lee, coming after a series of mainstream Malay-language horror films he directed. Lee is more known for his slow-paced art films in which not much action or drama occurs. However, he believes that mainstream kung fu or action dramas in Malaysia can have ethnic crossover appeal (Aidil Rusli 2012). Perhaps *Petaling Street Warriors* is the first of his films to attempt to bridge this gap. Similarly, the patriotic *Nasi Lemak 2.0* hybridizes and localizes the kung fu *moleitau* to reach non-Chinese Malaysian audiences; although the dialogue in both films is mainly in Mandarin, subtitles appear simultaneously in Malay, English and Chinese. Moreover, Namewee insists that 'we also included Malay, English and Tamil languages in our storyline to make this a truly "Muhibbah" [racially harmonious] film suitable for all Malaysians to enjoy' (Anonymous 2011). While the films' main target audience is Malaysian, *Petaling Street Warriors*, in collaborating with a Hong Kong action choreographer and doing post-production in Hong Kong, has ambitions for a more international audience. In both films, the Chinese characters are naively optimistic about the future in Malaysia, seeing it as a land full of possibility. *Warriors*, in eschewing royal lineage to China, can be read as embracing what it means to be a diasporic migrant in Malaya and holding a sense of possibility or hope in the new land. This is unlike the arthouse indie film, *Bird House* (Khoo Eng Yow, 2006) where the characters leave the historical seat of Malay empire – but now the backwater town of Malacca – to seek work in Singapore and boom time China. This reflects a realistic socio-economic pathway for Chinese Malaysians lacking opportunities in Malaysia due to the NEP.

Such declarations of having a stake in Malaysia from Chinese Malaysian directors come at a time when Malaysia's multicultural fabric is tested by ethno-nationalists and Islamicists keen on maintaining Malay primacy by resorting to divisive racial tactics. Religious and ethnic tension was particularly stoked in 2009 into early 2010 with the order of a Hindu temple relocation to a Muslim neighbourhood, in which ethnic Malay protestors staged a public protest with a decapitated cow head (an animal considered sacred by Hindus), the Malaysian customs confiscating Bibles that use the word Allah in

Malay and several Christian churches being firebombed as a result of the Lina Joy court ruling.[6] Partly the drive to preserve Malay primacy was provoked by Prime Minister Najib Razak's push to liberalize the economy and to end elements of the NEP in stages under the New Economic Model (2010), a gesture that is undermined by more right-wing sections in his party.

In fact, both James Lee and Namewee had earlier participated in the anti-racist, non-partisan 15Malaysia short film project produced by Pete Teoh in 2009 (15 short films that can be viewed on YouTube). Namewee's self-deprecating humour in 15Malaysia is evident in *Petaling Street Warriors* as it was his idea to play a character that is almost mute, a contrast to the foul-mouthed hip hop artist that he personifies in his YouTube rants. When his character eventually speaks, we learn that he has a speech impediment caused by a short tongue; this in itself becomes a source of humour. Both *Petaling Street Warriors* and *Nasi Lemak 2.0* were screened within a few months of each other in 2011.

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Generic concerns: the heteroglossic nonsensical kung fu comedy

Released and predominantly marketed as kung fu comedies, both films contain goofball comedic moments that provide raw entertainment. *Moleitau* (meaning 'nonsensical' in Cantonese) is a genre pioneered by Stephen Chow Sing-Chi in the early 1990s that is 'constrained by neither logic nor reality' (Hammond and Wilkins 1996, 175). Chow's undeniable influence is evident in the two films: *Nasi Lemak 2.0* is set in contemporary Malaysia but takes flights of fancy into the mythic past and includes scenes that do not necessarily make sense,[7] while *Petaling Street Warriors* is set in 1908 Malaya but includes anachronistic modern references such as 'casinos' rather than gambling dens/houses and a clever slight at contemporary brand Ikea (the Chinese version mentioned in the film being Yeekia, also using Ikea's characteristic yellow and blue logo). Jeff Yang notes that the *moleitau* combines 'verbal pyrotechnics, physical shenanigans and indefinable comic oomph that at its best was both ridiculous and sublime, and at its worst was painfully unwatchable' (2003, 122). *Petaling Street Warriors* contains physical shenanigans in the form of funny kung fu fight scenes, the climax being when the newly empowered Du Yao imitates the famous moves from Ip-Man, Wong Fei Hong, Bruce Lee (accompanied by the background music of 'Kung fu Fighting') and, finally, Michael Jackson (doing the moonwalk to the 'Billie Jean' soundtrack) to show off but also to distract his opponent with his part-dance part-kung fu moves. At the same time, the film is filled with sexual innuendos and cheap sexist and homophobic gags, in character with the typical *moleitau*'s reliance on ribald repartee and low-brow humour.[8] It constantly focuses on the protagonist Du Yao's virginity and his wife's big breasts, and features laughable characters and villains such as a sexually aggressive 'mamasan' who turns out to be a male cross-dresser, a Chinese eunuch and a British colonial officer coded as gay. This prompts a reviewer to call it a homage to the filmmaking style of 1980s Hong Kong low-brow filmmaker Wong Jing (Chan 2011).[9]

Nasi Lemak 2.0 easily has the lion's share of 'painfully unwatchable' physical comedy, where spastic minor characters loiter in the periphery for no good reason other than to generate laughter and an Indian faceless man is only ever shown massaging the matriarch and jiggling his exposed large hairy stomach and shaking his derrière (even through the more serious scenes, thereby disrupting the serious tone). The characters are quirky and chosen for their funny rather than good looks: Xiao K has thick bushy eyebrows; other characters are skinny, ungainly and tall or fat; Xiao K's father has goofy teeth and speaks localized English.

Moleitau is also a comedy that relies on euphemism and double entendre. In a multicultural, multilingual environment where not every viewer understands all the languages used and many have to rely on subtitles, those who do not understand Mandarin will not grasp the double entendre of 'zi wei' (自卫, self-defence) in *Petaling Street Warriors*, also a slang word for masturbation (自慰). When, at a village meeting, Du Yao suggests starting up a self-protection gang in the community – 'Satu Petaling Street, Satu DIY Gang! So let's DIY together [zi wei!]!' – the room clears and only an obese woman who fancies him volunteers eagerly, raises her fist and cheers 'zi wei!' with him. This forces Du Yao and his friends to make a quick exit. However, the double entendre escapes the ethnic Malay censor for whom the politically incorrect joke is only at the expense of obese women. At a political level, a subversive reading of the pun above is that the 1Malaysia official discourse, referenced by the Malay word 'Satu' for 'One', is self-pleasing but ultimately lacking in credibility among ordinary people. It might even be read as a statement uttered out of self-interest: Du Yao's community proposal is motivated by his desire to rescue his wife, not to save the community; likewise, Najib's unity slogan is motivated by his desire to maintain political power. At the personal level, the English subtitles translated as 'Defend It Yourself (DIY)' refer to independent film director James Lee's 'DIY' sensibilities, something that film buffs familiar with the local independent filmmaking scene would know.

Other than the physical and bawdy humour, wordplay is the main characteristic of Stephen Chow's *moleitau*, where characters make clever comebacks that do not make logical sense (non sequiturs) except to rhyme or sound funny. In the Malaysian *moleitau*, irrational comedy is derived from the incommensurability of language play – between written text and the sound of dialogue (Xiao K's father's localized English in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*), and between the subtitles and the dialogue in the original language/dialect. For example, Xiao K's father's mispronounced English is spelled out phonetically as written text on screen, visually estranging the aurally familiar to Malaysian ears for a foreign audience for whom the spelling will be completely nonsensical: 'What are you doing here?' is translated into 'wat r ju luin hear?' and 'Everybody knows me. I'm the boss of this restaurant' appears as 'ehbeebody noe mee. I am le bos of lis lestolan'. Here Namewee makes fun of the mangled and hybrid form of English spoken in Malaysia, sometimes renamed 'Manglish'. In *Petaling Street Warriors*, language play occurs in numerous ways: a straightforward, unedited translation from English to Mandarin between the British officer, his local Chinese interpreter and Du Yao that made the dialogue unnecessarily protracted; dubbing (the mysterious woman who seduces Du Yao is revealed to be a Japanese spy but her Japanese speech is dubbed into Mandarin); a talking parrot (speaking in Mandarin and Hokkien), and Du Yao speaking 'birdlish' to it (another reference to Manglish or 'Singlish', as it is known in Singapore); and last, when Namewee's character speaks with his short tongue but may not have been fully understood by Du Yao, who mimics him. Puns and rhyming are utilized to provide humour as well: in a fight scene, an attacker who calls himself 'Iron Eagle' is promptly renamed 'Fly' (which rhymes with Iron Eagle in Mandarin) after Liu Kun head butts him in the stomach. Punning across two languages occurs, such as when Shi Du Yao says, 'My Grandpa gave me my surname, Shi, that's why I'm in deep trouble now' (inferring 'shit' from 'trouble'). These playful instances of multilingual humour (Shi/shit) presuppose an audience that is minimally bilingual and threaten to dislodge the masterful reading position of solely English or solely Chinese speaking viewers.

Diverse and plural meanings pertain all the more in a multicultural and multilingual context like that of Malaysia, where the state ideology of Malay primacy and pro-Malay

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or rather pro-UMNO (United Malays National Organisation)[10] policies subvert the messages of national unity in diversity in the slogan '1Malaysia'. Although Bakhtin was discussing language and the novel, his concepts of hybridity, dialogism and heteroglossia have been adopted and adapted by postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha to theorize the conditions of postcolonial societies and their resultant hybrid identities when discussing nation and narration (Bhabha 1994). There is a doubleness (or doublespeak) when it comes to the 'Malay/sian' nation as pro-Malay policies are simultaneously caught in a tension with the official narrative of ethnic pluralism and tolerance (Khoo 2006). The National Cultural Policy emphasizes assimilation rather than integration to Malay culture, and the assimilatory policies foster belief in cultural purity for both Muslim Malays and Chinese. The lag between official rhetoric and practice results in a sense of disbelief in the role of the state to implement fairness and equity among Malaysians of all ethnicities. These two films highlight existing cultural hybridity through mixing film and music genres, as I will show shortly.

Wordplay is a practical outcome of the heteroglossia text. Non-Malaysian audiences might best appreciate the richness of these films through Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, in which he defines 'heteroglossia' as 'the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance' and 'that which insures the primacy of context over text' (1981, 428). According to Bakhtin, a set of social, historical and physiological conditions will at any one time ensure that the utterance has a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions. Thus, 'all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve' (ibid.). What Bakhtin operationalizes is a perception of language or utterances that are open to multiple meanings, and for whom language is always evolving and situational. For example, Chef Huang's main competitor from China is named 'Lan Xiao'. However, in Hokkien, it sounds like 'penis'. So a double entendre occurs each time his name is enunciated. If heteroglossia is 'another's speech in another's language serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way' (Bakhtin 1981, 324), the auteur's intended messages are refracted through different levels in the film, sometimes working at cross-purposes or in dialogue with each other. That the handsome mainland Chinese chef is given a name open to a derogatory reading already suggests a subversion of his character on the part of the script (one that encourages the viewers to laugh at him and not take him seriously). Even as Chef Huang struggles to define his identity (as an inferior hybrid diasporic Chinese Malaysian) against the authentic Chineseness that his antagonist signifies, the rich polyglossic joke is on the Chinese purists and Lan Xiao who functions as a 'dick' to Xiao K's aunt (being her lover) without knowing the Hokkien meaning of his name. Such irreverence addresses the peripheral and powerless position of the diaspora Chinese in Malaysia who regard China as a virile economic force and cultural powerhouse: in the film, Chef Huang constantly loses jobs to Chinese nationals who settle for lower salaries, one of whom (Lan Xiao) is an accomplished violinist. This insult also reflects Namewee's fear of racial castration whereby race and masculinity are conflated and projected as sino-masculinity (Tshiung 2011). Additionally, it projects fears of China as a powerful military threat/Other in the final scene when Lan Xiao unmasks his true identity as a loyal ideologue wearing a Maoist soldier's uniform. The film implies that the Chinese dominate both ends of the global labour hierarchy: low waged jobs as well as the high arts.

These two Malaysian films are 'polyglossic'[11] in representing languages spoken by Malaysia's multi-ethnic and multi-dialect society: Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay, Hakka, Baba Malay,[12] Teochew, Tamil and English. In that way, they defy definitions of

what Chinese cinema might sound and look like, although they are predominantly in Mandarin and feature mostly ethnic Chinese actors. Even the accent of Mandarin spoken is not standardized: Mark Lee's Mandarin accent (playing Du Yao) is heavily Singaporean and colloquial compared to the actor who plays the eunuch (Frederic Lee). The southern Mandarin accent, which includes Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, is often regarded as less sophisticated compared to the Beijing accent from a Chinese cultural perspective, but these two Malaysian films unapologetically identify as 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001) in that the diasporic protagonists revel in their wordplay and Nanyang Mandarin accents.[13] More importantly, not only are different languages spoken in the film, but often sentences uttered in one language or dialect are interspersed with words borrowed from other languages, ensuring a constant creolization or hybridity at work. Furthermore, local dialects (Hokkien or Malay words) disrupt Mandarin speech, and hybridization occurs through the interplay between multiple meanings in the translation in the subtitles. In *Petaling Street Warriors*, Mark Lee's Mandarin speech (interspersed with Hokkien words for food again) is translated as 'I've turned your face into a hamburger. If we continue, it could become a roti planta'. Hamburger substitutes for the Hokkien sweet cake, 'ku kueh', and the Malay roti planta, simply meaning a margarine sandwich, substitutes for 'huat kueh'. The relationship between the dialogue and subtitles is crucial in these films, as much unintended comedy is often derived in the Malaysian film and television viewing experience from bad (nonsensical) subtitling.

Malaysian audiences gain pleasure from polyglossia and local knowledge in a scene where Du Yao's linguistic polyglossia and adaptation to local ways help him to evade the eunuch who is chasing him for the treasure map written on the wok. Since Du Yao lacks the martial arts skills to confront the eunuch, he instead relies on his cunning, disappearing into a basket only to appear first in one and then another. In the ultimate Southeast Asian revenge, he tricks the eunuch into putting his hands on a *durian* in the basket (a thorny fruit found only in the region and used as a weapon in this comic scenario). Du Yao performs a few other 'now you see it now you don't' type tricks with the wok, and then insults the eunuch with interspersed Malay words in the Mandarin speech: 'Bodoh, sudah jalan – the wok is gone. I've swallowed it. Ok, time to run!'[14]

Lastly, heteroglossia appears in the form of referencing different mainstream film genres that are popular with Malaysian audiences. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* incorporates mythological-historical Chinese-Malay costumed martial arts drama, Bollywood elements, *Chinese koh tai* (stage opera), the road movie and the horror/ghost film into the *moleitau* kung fu comedy. But more importantly, while drawing from a myriad of genres it also deconstructs and hybridizes each in classic Malaysian fashion,[15] while at the same time hints of social significance. The koh tai karaoke song is in English but the tune is Chinese, with the exception of Hokkien references to food/dishes like 'bauhu' and 'wonton mee'. Furthermore Chef Huang and Xiao K's glitzy costumes are from the 1930s – he in top hat and tuxedo and she in a flapper dress. Their retro costumes and English lyrics are in stark contrast to the working class Chinese background of the setting and its audiences, symbolizing upper class pretensions far removed from the grassroots. Their unpopularity with the audiences, however, testifies to their inability to cater to localized tastes and satirizes a colonized mentality. This class disparity marked by English language is accentuated in a scene with a gang leader in the audience (played by Pete Teo) whom Chef Huang insults as 'smelly banana' for speaking in English instead of Mandarin. This scene, coming after a char koay teow (fried rice noodles) seller advises him to 'localize'[16] and to let go of his Chinese training, shows a lack of self-awareness still on the protagonist's part as he has yet to set out on his journey of self-discovery.

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No genre remains pure in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*: 'Curry Neh', a Bollywood-inspired song, has Indian rhythms, Indian dancers and dance styles but is sung in Mandarin. The setting replicates Bollywood conventions and the lyrics say as much:

> You appear and disappear so suddenly
> This feels like a Bollywood love story
> Hiding behind the bushes and between the trees
> Here comes the hero and heroine.

As expected of the genre, there are costume changes (three) and scenes in natural settings like a stream, field and landscaped garden. In one sequence, Namewee's denim jacket and jeans look with bandanna hearkens to that of a famous Malay pop rocker from the early 1990s, Awie. The parody or homage suggests an internal dialogism at work – embracing cheesy conventions of the genre but not taking it seriously, as clearly expressed on Namewee's face while he is doing the dance moves. At the same time, it also speaks to the popularity of Bollywood and its influence on Malay cinema.

Such internal dialogism is what Bakhtin calls a 'double-voicedness', contradicting discourses and ideologies within the text that may not be resolvable. These contradictions are long-standing and continuous for those Hamid Naficy would call 'diasporic and post-colonial ethnic and identity' filmmakers who produce 'accented cinema'. Such filmmakers deal with personal questions of belonging as marginalized ethnic groups within their nation, seeking to belong while asserting a right to be different. For example, the question of national loyalty *vs.* ethno-cultural chauvinism that Chinese Malaysians are confronted with openly by Malay ethno-nationalist politicians who often tell them to 'go back to China' is raised in *Nasi Lemak 2.0*. In Chef Huang's dream sequences, he and Xiao K are transformed into two mythical flying Chinese warriors who land in Nanyang only to be told in Malay, which they do not understand, by a Malay warrior that it is better for them to return to China. Yet when he wakes up and meets the Malay man of his dreams in real life, the latter is warm and welcoming, as if implying that it is only politicians who hyperrealize racism by championing the Malay cause, not ordinary Malays in everyday situations. In another scene where one waiter voices that the cooking competition reminds him of the Thomas Cup badminton championship (when Malaysia played against China), he asks for which national team his friend would cheer. The question is deftly left unanswered but nevertheless it is a question commonly asked of Chinese Malaysian subjects. Namewee's 'negotiation of the local, national and the diasporic' (Koh 2008, 53) is a dominant thread in his work and illustrates a dialogic tension between what it means to be ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, embracing multiculturalism and being part of a larger cultural Chinese diaspora. Thus, what Bakhtin offers is a political approach to textual analysis, grounding it to the author's broader social context, which features as a backdrop in many scenes. I will focus next on the films' politics of identity, their 'social heteroglossia'.

'Social heteroglossia': political context and imagined community

As highly patriotic films that attempt to address a multi-ethnic audience, both films openly declare the allegiance of Malaysians with migrant ancestries to Malaysia. In a key scene in *Warriors*, the founder of the Chinese Republic Dr. Sun Yat Sen, during his fund-raising campaign in the Nanyang, stops to eat at Du Yao's Hokkien mee stall. Lending a sympathetic ear, he says, 'Nanyang immigrants suffer from never-ending hardship in

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order to build their new homes, and yet they are deemed as outsiders and got pushed around by the colonial government'. Dr. Sun then advises Du Yao that rather than escape adversity, he should face it like a man and not fear hardship or authority. In another scene, when Du Yao's Indian friend Rajoo says that he came to Malaya because he didn't 'want to be bullied by the Englishmen' only to be confronted by triads and extortion, their other friend replies, 'you're bullied by the foreigners. We are [bullied] by our very own people'. The discerning Malaysian would be able to read 'the colonial government' and 'our very own people' as symbolic of the postcolonial UMNO-led government which has continued to rely on colonial racial divide-and-rule tactics and other oppressive measures formerly associated with the British. Nevertheless, the patriotism in both films is not uncritical of the current state of affairs in the country.

Rather, the social critique is mediated through an everyman's perspective that regards the state of the nation today as being a time of chaos: when heroes are needed to resolve the problems of crime, extortion, bullying, perceived threats from outside the (ethnic) community, and so on. For example, Chef Huang in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* is the neighbourhood hero who solves the problems of every individual in the community. The complaints include policemen harassing unlicensed Chinese vendors but not Malay vendors, illegal gambling, water supplies being cut off, clogged drains, being rejected for student loans despite scoring 10 As in the national exams, and petty and personal crime. (These are social problems commonly encountered by Malaysians, especially ethnic minorities.) However, his community is homogenously all-Chinese; that he has to take a journey to learn to embrace diversity and regain humility suggests that communal leadership embodied in race-based parties like the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and racialization no longer holds much value. Thus, the film is as much a critique of Chinese chauvinism as it is an overt critique of *ketuanan Melayu*. Read in the political historical context of its time,[17] *Nasi Lemak 2.0* suggests an end to racial mistrust and racism among Malaysians.[18] It might very well signal a shift from the belief in communal leadership (Chef Huang as the local hero of the Chinese community) to one that raises national unity above race politics, mirroring the mandate of the political opposition, Pakatan Rakyat, in Malaysia. One of the reasons communal politicians lack credibility with the grassroots is because they are 'insignificant partner[s] in government' with UMNO (Nagarajan and Arumugam 2012, 82). This is reflected in the representation of the panel of three judges for the cooking competition whose names in Cantonese closely resemble the three main political parties [UMNO, MCA and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC)]. Two of the judges (MCA and MIC) defer to the main judge (representing UMNO), demonstrating a lack of independence in decision-making and bias against Chef Huang.

Moreover, the '2.0' in the title of rapper-turned-filmmaker Namewee's film prompted viewers to draw parallels to the Bersih 2.0 mass rally for clean and fair elections held a few months before the film premiered, when yellow T-shirts (the colour adopted by Bersih 2.0) were banned by the government. Whether intended or not, the yellow jackets worn by Chef Huang and the other students at the culinary school seem to call out to be read as the rapper-turned-director's sympathy with Bersih 2.0.

Similarly, there is a parallel democratic principle at work in *Petaling Street Warriors*. Those in power are represented as unreliable and inefficient in curbing corruption and disorder. The self-interested British officer colludes with the eunuch and gangs extort 'protection money' from street vendors, as Du Yao explains: 'That ah knwa angmoh [gay white] police is even worse! For his own interest, he cares nothing about catching the real bad guys. Instead, he locked me up in prison in the name of "protecting" me...'. The implication is that corrupt institutions provoke the ordinary working class to defend and

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protect themselves. At the same time, the anti-corruption sentiments expressed in *Petaling Street Warriors* also raise questions about the role of ordinary citizens as complicit in perpetuating corruption at an everyday level when they pay money to those operating outside the parameters of the law to smooth things over. Out of a sense of justice, Du Yao does not want his wife to pay what he considers to be a bribe (or what she regards as a token of their appreciation) to the gangsters for 'protection' in the opening scene. While set in 1908, the lines uttered by the British captain to arrest the good characters 'for their own protection' derive from recent real-life political events which viewers would immediately recognize.[19] Likewise, the infamous statement by high-profile lawyer V. K. Lingam – 'It looks like me, sounds like me but it's not me' – in which Lingam denied he was caught on video boasting about fixing key judicial appointments[20] appears in both films to remind Malaysians of the existing state of corruption outside the filmic text today, which is the social heteroglossia that inspires these creative acts of production.

The ideal 'imagined community' envisioned by James Lee is that of a nation built on sound principles of populist democracy that fosters self-actualization on the part of its citizens. Populist democracy is internalized by the migrant work ethic and a belief in self-reliance and the entrepreneurial spirit. At the end of the film, Sunny Pang's character gets to fulfil his ambition of opening up a coffee shop while the more mature Du Yao, with a new sense of hope and drive, voluntarily gives up his position and privilege as royalty to live life as an ordinary working class noodle seller. Additionally, while I read *Warriors* as expressing scepticism about the role of the monarchy in a modern democratic society, since it is Du Yao's royal lineage that gets him and his friends into trouble in the first place, writer and filmmaker Amir Muhammad offers another reading, stating that the ending of *Petaling Street Warriors* is 'in the spirit of democratic optimism: it's only when we give up inherited privileges that we can truly live (together)' (Amir 2011). One could interpret Amir's statement as metaphorical of the majority Malays giving up *bumiputera* privileges for the sake of a truly egalitarian and just multicultural society.

While *Petaling Street Warriors* is less multi-ethnic in its casting than *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (there is a stark absence of any main ethnic Malay characters), it is still more multi-ethnic than other mainstream Chinese-language films made in Malaysia or those from Hong Kong, China or Taiwan. One of Du Yao's closest friends is Rajoo, who speaks fluent Mandarin and plays a supporting role. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* goes further in its representation of a hybrid cosmopolitan Malaysia by deconstructing racialization: Namewee features African, Nepali and Indian characters who surprisingly speak Chinese (Mandarin and Teochew); racial-cultural boundaries and stereotypes are broken (the Malay nasi lemak seller's *chi qong* is more powerful than Chef Huang's), and textbook mythic-histories that are used to buttress Malay rights and cultural hegemony, such as the legend of Hang Tuah,[21] are subverted. In a scene that mimics the magical landscape in the mytho-historical Malay film, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* [*The Princess of Mt. Ledang*] (Saw Teong Hin, 2004), Malay warrior Hang Tuah is played by Indian rapper Reshmonu. He saves Namewee from a keris-wielding ethnofascist Malay (representing Ibrahim Ali of Perkasa, a Malay right-wing non-governmental organization) by stopping the keris from stabbing Namewee using a pair of chopsticks. Selecting an ethnic Indian actor to play Hang Tuah is playful and strategic as it critiques both the discourse of Malay authenticity as well as Chinese resistance to Malay dominance that manifests as rumours that Hang Tuah may actually be a Chinese rather than Malay name. Reshmonu's Indianness signifies a simultaneous inclusivity of the third 'race' that breaks down the common Malay-Chinese dichotomy (see Khoo 2009, 110). These multiple and constant references to Malaysian multicultural specificity make the films 'accented cinema', focusing on 'the dynamics of

assimilation and resistance' (Naficy 2001, 8). They suggest that Chinese Malaysians do take an interest in national issues that are not solely related to Chinese culture despite years of racialization and marginalization. Chinese Malaysians like Namewee and James Lee may have Mandarin and Cantonese in common with Taiwanese, Chinese mainlanders and Hong Kongers but they also establish their own unique national identity while resisting assimilation to Malayness as minority Chinese Malaysians.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 reflects the realities of social interaction among Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds, but one that is removed from official slogans and that occurs subversively and naturally by breaking down or transgressing racial boundaries. 'A relationship of interchange that opens up and reconfigures identity in cultural practice', 'quotidian transversality' occurs when individuals 'in everyday spaces use particular modes of sociality to produce or smooth interrelations across cultural difference, whether or not this difference is a conscious one' (Wise 2010, 23). Quotidian transversality 'highlights how cultural difference can be the basis for commensality and exchange; where identities are not left behind, but can be shifted and opened up in moments of non-hierarchical reciprocity, and are sometimes mutually reconfigured in the process' (Wise 2010, 23). Chef Huang undergoes this process on his journey to learn how to make the perfect nasi lemak from members of various ethnic groups: an Indian man who only instructs him in Tamil, a couple of Peranakan Chinese descent, and a happy Malay polygamous family. All three cross-cultural encounters are symbolic. In the first case, Chef Huang learns from the Indian cook despite the lack of shared language, as if to say that transversal cosmopolitanism, the ability to transcend cultural or linguistic differences, is as instinctive as a talented chef's cooking. In the second instance, the Peranakan couple turn out to be ghosts, as if to signify symbolic spectral reminders of a much longer history of Chinese migrant localization and cultural hybridity that continues to haunt the Malaysian racialized landscape even as this hybridity is being repressed by both Malay and Chinese purists. For example, when Chef Huang asks the Peranakan couple if *nasi lemak* isn't a Malay dish rather than a Chinese one, they describe to him how they have come to embrace it through years of adaptation and adoption of local cuisine. Food and music successfully fuse various ethnic cultures; their production and consumption mediate quotidian transversality and this is acknowledged by the filmmaker himself: 'My message is that the system in Malaysia is unequal. But when we live together, we eat together, there is no racism'.[22] Indeed, the scene where Chef Huang and Xiao K sit down to dinner with the Malay man and his four wives reflects an example of two-way crossings. Not only do the Chinese couple eat Malay food and learn about Malay Muslim customs (to eat with one's right hand), but one of the wives surprises them by speaking in Mandarin and reciting a classical Chinese poem as it turns out that she was educated in a Chinese vernacular school.

Conclusion

International audiences who readily approach the film from the perspective of film genre alone may miss intertextual references to political scandals and social issues that dominated the local media in the years leading up to 2011 that provoke a rich social heteroglossic reading for Malaysian viewers. The films' heteroglossic play exceeds the singularity of their original genre, of what it means to be a kind of homogenous 'ethnic Chinese film product' that circulates globally and is received or understood in a universal way. However, the films' heteroglossic meanings, their hybridity and polyglossia will not be appreciated by global audiences who will miss the intertextual local references. This is exacerbated if the films are subtitled by film festival subtitlers who may be translating from the existing

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English subtitles or the dialogue directly. For example, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* had Japanese subtitles at the 2012 Okinawa International Movie Festival and *Petaling Street Warriors* had French and English subtitles at the 2012 Neuchâtel International Fantastic Film Festival. Without further research into audience reception, it is not clear how much local inflection these audiences missed or noticed. Indeed, critics and reviewers regard the hybrid localized elements that mark the films as Malaysian as a barrier to global markets or as limiting their potential for overseas success (Gaultier 2011). Likewise, Naficy has observed that accented films tend to command niche audiences. The ideological requirement for a monologic style is moulded by the long global monopoly of Hollywood narrative and cultural conventions. Hollywood with its American English dialogue and adaptations of foreign film titles, because of its fear of the use of subtitles, may one day be overtaken by the rising economic power, China (and concomitantly, perhaps, its own monologic use of Mandarin over all other dialects like Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, etc. in its cinema). However, treating these kung fu comedies as heteroglossic texts or accented cinema enriches the reading of the films. Moreover, rather than regarding the political reading that revolves around social themes as transcending the low-brow humour of the Wong Jing variety, one could arguably say that Bakhtin's dialogic imagination enables the polyglossic films to use the low-brow humour to disguise the serious themes and evade the censors. It allows the filmmakers to smuggle in biting satire and social commentary that this article has hopefully helped to tease out.

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Notes

1. In this article, 'hybrid' is used to refer to a mixture or blend of different cultures that defies any notion of purity due to cross-cultural contact in the region. 'Cosmopolitan' for me connotes a progressive attitude of openness to the culture of others; it treats diversity as a fact (Hollinger 2002). It 'is defined against those parochialisms emanating from extreme allegiances to nation, race, and ethnos' (Anderson 1998, 267). Cosmopolitan Malaysians are those able to identify with others not because they are of the same ethnicity but on the basis of a shared outlook and common values, for example wanting a corruption-free government. Cosmopolitanism differs from pluralism, which tends to 'protect and perpetuate particular existing cultures'; instead cosmopolitan endeavours to break down and question these categories, thereby displaying a sceptical awareness of the constructed nature of racialization (Hollinger 1995, 85–86).
2. Najib Razak's alleged racist past caught up with him when he announced his 1Malaysia policy as news of his involvement as UMNO Youth Chief leading a UMNO Youth rally in 1987 resurfaced. At this rally, banners were hoisted carrying phrases such as 'revoke the citizenship of those who oppose the Malay rulers' and 'May 13 has begun' (referring to the May 13 racial riots in 1969) and 'Soak it (Kris) With Chinese Blood' (Lim 2000).

3. See http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&id=1215.
4. See the TalentCorp Malaysia website: http://www.talentcorp.com.my/malaysians-abroad/returning-expert-programme/.
5. A noodle dish stir fried with black sauce and pork lard associated with the Hokkien dialect group that is popular in Kuala Lumpur.
6. Malays are defined in the constitution as Muslim and have a difficult time leaving Islam. Lina Joy is a Malay Muslim who wanted to change the stated religion on her identity card from Islam to Christian to reflect her conversion. Her case was highly controversial and politicized by ethno-nationalists.
7. For example a bizarre scene in the car when Chef Huang without any reason starts to sniff Xiao K, who is driving, and seems to want to bite her neck. His actions cause them to get into an accident.
8. A blogger who calls himself 'moleitau' defines the genre as 'Verbal nonsense comedy that relies on quality writing of rapid-fire dialogue, witty ripostes and punning, ribald repartee, broad and low-brow humor, anachronistic gags and biting satire of every social convention and custom' (http://moleitau.tumblr.com/).
9. In an interview with James Lee, the director explained to me that these low-brow scenes were inserted by his Hong Kong co-director and producer, Sampson Yuen.
10. UMNO, a party formed to protect the rights of ethnic Malays during British colonial times, has been in power since Independence in 1957. The prime minister of Malaysia is usually the head of UMNO.
11. Polyglossia is 'the simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system' (Bakhtin 1981, 431).
12. 'Baba' represents the men while 'Nyonya' represents the women of the Peranakan ('local born') Chinese. Descendants of Chinese who settled in Malacca in the 1400s (through marriage to local women), the Peranakans created a hybrid culture by adapting to the local dress and language while keeping their rituals such as ancestor worship and religion. Their cuisine borrows and blends Chinese with Malay ingredients and cooking styles.
13. For a discussion that compares Malaysian Mandarin with Beijing accents, see http://www.chinalanguage.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=1454.
14. 'Bodoh' means 'stupid' and 'sudah jalan' is an awkward way of saying 'it's gone'. 'Jalan' and 'run' rhyme but are probably chosen because they contain similar meanings: 'Jalan' can mean 'to walk', 'road' or 'for something to move, work or function'.
15. Malaysian multiculturalism and fusion/hybridity is sometimes summed up as a local dish, *rojak*, a fruit salad held together with a shrimp-based sauce.
16. Although by 'localize' the noodle seller meant that Chef Huang should adapt to the local palate by using local ingredients rather than stick to his Chinese training, the ideal position would be neither to blindly adopt the colonial culture and language (and be accused of being yellow on the outside and white inside) nor to remain 'purely' Chinese.
17. The most blatant political historical context for the film is Bersih 2.0, when Malaysians of all ethnic backgrounds and ages showed up at a mass rally to demand free and fair elections on 9 July 2011 despite threats from pro-government supporters of communal violence; the sense of national unity they felt when offered relief by Malaysians of other ethnic backgrounds to escape the tear gas and water cannons is captured in personal accounts in blogs and letters to the alternative press; and, more generally, the non-racial politics of the political opposition, the Pakatan Rakyat (The People's Coalition).
18. However, racism towards foreign workers, like the Nepali security guard whom Chef Huang consistently abuses, continues. To the film's credit, the security guard is not represented as a passive victim. He calls Chef Huang a 'racist' in front of everyone in the scene when he gets to judge the cooking competition.
19. *Sin Chew Daily* reporter Tan Hoon Cheng had reported on racist remarks by UMNO division chief Ahmad Ismail and was later said to have been arrested 'for her own protection' (Ding 2010, 27).
20. In 2007, a video clip secretly recorded on a mobile phone in 2002 surfaced in the media. It showed a man believed to be a prominent lawyer, V. K. Lingam, boasting that he could get key judicial appointments made with Prime Minister Mahathir's help. Lingam's line was heavily lampooned on the internet (*The Star* 2008).

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21. Hang Tuah is a famous legendary Malay warrior and hero from the days of the Malacca Empire. His exploits are written in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and the *Sejarah Melayu* [The Malay Annals].
22. From Movement for Change, Sarawak website, 17 September 2011 (http://mocsarawak.wordpress.com/2011/09/17/nasi-lemak-2-0-can-we-learn-to-laugh-at-ourselves-too/).

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