NEW VILLAGE

Featuring a review of Sheena Baharudin's Rhymes for Mending Hearts, an interview with documentary filmmaker Boon Kia Meng, a photo essay by Azzief Khaliq, and a short story by Zedeck Siew!



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New Village is a quarterly zine on Malaysian culture and literature. Contact us at newvillagezine@gmail.com.

Editor's Note

Here at New Village, we feel that every time a new issue is published, the editor's note turns into a manifesto. This fits our name, "New Village"—every issue is something new and different, a new beginning. We feel that we ought to move away from this "permanent revolution" model to something more structured, though; this issue provides the seeds for this new approach.

New Village wants to move culture along in Malaysia. As the cover of this issue shows—we want this to be read in coffee shops, mamaks and kopitiams, where you can accompany your reading with a beverage. We want people thinking about their everyday lives, and how they are intimately related to the surrounding culture. Culture is a form of osmosis—you breathe in it, contribute to it, even if you are unaware of it. New Village is dedicated to trying to map out its contours in Malaysia, and drive culture in another direction.

That's where this issue comes in. We continue to believe in the importance of representation, because to move things along, we have to know where we are, and where we are heading—fiction, photos and interviews help do this. Apart from that, we want to bring back a "critical culture" (in Dain Said's words), and our modest contribution is to resurrect something absent lately from the cultural scene—good, in-depth criticism. Good criticism requires more than a negative critical attitude; it's a practice that is borne out of good faith, and a belief in the critical process. Ideally the writer and reader will learn something from the critic's careful evaluation, which benefits future writing and thought. That's our hope, anyway.

—ZH Liew, editor

Mrs Chandra's War Against Dust

A short story by Zedeck Siew

Down on her knees, Mrs Chandra squeezes her left eye shut and presses her cheek to the floor.

The marble is covered in tiny particles. She wipes it with a finger, and her finger comes away smudged with a line of grey and black. "Dusty, so dusty!" Mrs Chandra says. "And I just swept and mopped yesterday!"

It is always extra dusty, nowadays. Because of the construction work: down the hill, on the main road there. They tore down all the shophouses—where Tan Brothers and her favourite sundry shop used to be—and now they are building a supermarket.

The front door opens. Mrs Chandra looks up and sees Mr Chandra wander in, absorbed in his morning paper. His sandals are still strapped to his feet.

She chases him out the door with a broom.



Down on her knees, Mrs Chandra presses her cheek to the floor and squeezes her right eye shut.

The marble is covered in dust. She wipes it with a hand, and her palm comes away smudged with a line of black and grey. "So dusty!" she says, getting up. "And this morning I just swept and mopped!"

The front door opens. Mrs Chandra looks up and sees Mr Chandra wander in with his shoes still on. "Ya, you know how it is," he is saying.

"Darling, we're home! Oh."

Mr Chandra sees Mrs Chandra's fierce expression. "Sorry darling, sorry," he says, his arms up like he is trying to be friends with a tiger.

"Hi mom," Mrs Chandra's son says.

Her son has a girl with him—a Chinese girl in long sleeves and a modest skirt. "This is Sandy," her son says.

"Hello auntie," the girl says.

"Hello hello!" Mrs Chandra says. "So nice, finally I get to meet you! Always Abhi is talking about you. Aiyo, such a pretty girl." She puts a hand on the girl's cheek; the girl blushes. "Come in come in," Mrs Chandra says. "Sorry the floor is so dusty, why is because this uncle here always likes to wear his shoes into the house."

"I said sorry isn't it?" Mr Chandra says.

She'd cooked mutton curry and spicy potatoes, her son's favourites. As she clears the plates, she hears him pester Mr Chandra to get one of those new smartphone things.

Her son is saying: "Look.

"This thing, it looks at which roads are jammed, then it lets you know the fastest way to take. It's really good! I use it every day coming back from work. And look, this thing, if you hear a song and you want to know what song it is, you turn this thing on, and you put it to the radio, and in a few seconds—"

"Aiyo, I don't need a new phone," Mr Chandra says. "All these new things, it's not for me."

"As you can see my parents are dinosaurs," her son says. His girlfriend giggles.

"As it is, having one phone is bad enough," Mr Chandra says. "Last time all my friend's numbers I memorised. Then I got this phone. Now, one number also I cannot remember!"

Her son says: "That's what the address book is for, isn't it?"

Mr Chandra says: "That's my point! You let your phone remember everything for you, do everything for you—when you don't have a phone, then how? Helpless!"



"One hundred times already I've said," Mr Chandra says. "I don't need a new phone. These new things are not for me."

"You are such a dinosaur, Mr Chandra!" her son's girlfriend says.

Her son's girlfriend is a white girl. She wears a sleeveless blouse, and a pair of shorts—too short!—and she has big tattoo of a naked lady on her right shoulder, from top to elbow. Even though it only shows the naked lady's back, still it's not decent. Why does her son bring home girls like this?

Mrs Chandra says: "Abhi come help me with the dessert, please?"

Her son slouches into the kitchen, hmph-ing. He knows what helping with dessert means.

At the dinner table, Mr Chandra says: "You let your phone remember everything, do everything, but when you don't have a phone, how then? You'll be helpless. Like a chicken, no head!"

"Hehehe!" her son's girlfriend laughs, chirpy and birdlike.

"Mom, what?" her son says.

"I don't like her," Mrs Chandra says. "What happened to the other one? The Chinese one. What was her name? I liked her. She was very nice, I thought. Maybe nicer than this one. Aiyo, what was her name?"

"Sandy."

"Ya, Sandy, that one! Decent girl. This one, she has such a big tattoo, I know you young people like this kind of thing, but don't you think it is a bit shameful?"

"Okay mom," her son says.

He turns around and leaves her alone in the kitchen.

Outside, at the dinner table, he tells Mr Chandra: "Dad, actually it's getting late. We're going to make a move."

"Oh baby, but we can stay," her son's white girlfriend says. "Your father is so funny!"

But in twenty minutes they are going, and as they leave Mrs Chandra's son makes a point not to say goodnight to his mother. Mrs Chandra is confused. Why did her son get angry? She was just giving him gentle, mother-to-son advice.

"I was just giving him advice," Mrs Chandra says.

"You brought up that Sandy girl?" Mr Chandra says, slamming his glass on the table. "Ah of course he got upset! What for did you go and do that, you stupid woman?"

Mrs Chandra is totally surprised.

"Why you looking at me like that?" Mr Chandra says. "You should know what you did wrong, isn't it? What, you mean to say—what? You don't remember what happened?"



"Mom, you—you really don't remember what happened?" her son asks her. "Are you serious?"

"Your amma going senile," Mr Chandra says. "Again I tell her about it, again she forgets. Own son's business also cannot keep track."

"Not my fault, isn't it?" Mrs Chandra says. "Who asked Abhi to have so many girlfriends?"

It is years ago, now. Her son's Chinese girlfriend—Mrs Chandra's favourite and the one she thought the most suitable—turned out not to be that suitable after all. She was a bad girl. She was Abhi's girlfriend, but at the same time she also had many other boyfriends. And then Abhi found out, and he was so

heartbroken he came home to live with them for a week.

"For a week he didn't come out of his room!" Mr Chandra says. "Just stayed in there, reading his old books. You were so worried! Every day you were knocking, knocking on his door: Abhi, want to talk? Are you okay? Come out, tell amma what happened.

"Every day!"

"I think I got better just so that you would stop nagging me," her son says. He puts his arm around her, kisses her on the cheek. "But mom," he says. "You really can't remember? It might be serious. Seriously. You should go for a check-up."

Mrs Chandra says: "Aiyo, don't need to worry, I'm old already. Being old is like this."

Although—she is so very, very forgetful nowadays.

The usual thing is forgetting where she's put her reading spectacles. And sometimes she mistakes weekends for weekdays, or which days are days to go temple. Mrs Chandra is reluctant to go to temple.

What if she goes, but she can't remember the names of people there? How to show her face like that?

One morning she wanted to call Mr Chandra, to remind him to buy soy sauce from the supermarket—but then she realised she didn't know his phone number; she couldn't remember it.

When Mr Chandra got back to the house, he found his wife staring at the keypad of the house phone, crying quietly.

He put his arm around her and he kissed her.

"Darling, aiyo don't worry darling," he said. "It's not a big thing. I'll get you a phone, and done, problem solved. No need to memorise numbers anymore, the phone can do it for you."



In the morning Mrs Chandra finds that they are out of soy sauce, and she wants to ask Mr Chandra to buy a new bottle from Tan Brothers—but then she realises she can't remember where she's put her phone.

She turns the house upside down, looking for it.

Why is it so bad, her memory? How can it be? She is just sixty-plus.

Mr Chandra's birthday: June 27. Every two days, he goes to the coffeeshop to meet Dr Rama, Mr Netto, his cronies. The sports he follows in the newspaper: football, hockey, and—and one more? What is it?

Her son's favourite dishes: mutton curry, spiced potatoes. Her son's fiancee: they've been engaged for over a year already, and soon he'll be getting married. Mrs Chandra is happy about this. The girl is a good girl.

What is the girl's name? Sandy?

Mrs Chandra feels a little jealous of her son's fiancee. The young people; they get to do what they like, go where they want to go. The two of them might be going to France to work.

No chance for her and Mr Chandra to do those things any more. Go travelling-travelling abroad and all. She is already fifty-plus. And with memory problems, too. Not all people have memory problems this bad, Mrs Chandra thinks. Why is it so bad for her?

Looking up from her dressing table drawer and out the window, Mrs Chandra notices a new supermarket down on the main road. It is a three-storey building with billboards on every side.

Goat's Milk Body Lotion—for fairer, younger looking skin!

The Big Breakfast Burger Boss, only RM5.99!



Increase brainpower and do well in exams—drink Essence of Chicken!

Where did this supermarket come from?

Wasn't it a row of shophouses? What happened to—oh, yes. They tore down all the shophouses to make way for this supermarket, isn't it? Always it is extra dusty, because of the construction work. That's why she has to sweep and mop so often nowadays.

But when did they finish building the supermarket?

Shivering, Mrs Chandra flings the curtains shut.

The Big Boss Burger Breakfast, only RM8.99!

Nutrex Sheep Placenta Extract—for fairer, younger looking skin!

Fortify your brainpower—

drink Essence of Chicken, with added Ginseng!

Mrs Chandra flings the curtains shut. Ever since they built that supermarket, she has to sweep and mop every day. She goes down on her knees and wipes the floor with one finger, and it comes away smudged with grey and black.

"Look, how dusty!" she says.

She has to clean the house because her son and his fiancee are coming today; they are visiting from overseas.

The front door opens.

At first, Mrs Chandra is angry: this man wanders in, reading his newspaper, still wearing his dirty sandals, stepping everywhere—so inconsiderate! But then she sees that the man is a stranger. So she screams.

She gets up and runs upstairs, into the bedroom, and she locks the door. She is panicking now. Who is this man? What does he want? Is he a robber? How did he get keys to the house?

Her heart is racing, and skips a beat when the phone on her dresser rings. She snatches it.

"Ey hello," Mr Chandra says. "I got your soy sauce. What's wrong with you? What for you suddenly run like—"

"Darling please come home now darling," Mrs Chandra says, whispering. "Please, there's a robber in the house."

"What?"

"A robber. How he got in, I don't know! Just only he came in the front door, I had to run upstairs. Please come home now!"

Sheena Baharudin's Rhymes for Mending Hearts

A review by Catalina Rembuyan



credit: gbgerakbudaya.com

At 85 poems, Sheena Baharudin's *Rhymes for Mending Hearts* is a hefty volume of poetry. This seems to be an anomaly for collections. I recently taught a class on Philip Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*, and that has 32 poems. Another spoken word artist with Malaysian roots, Omar Musa, has 20 poems in *Clocks* and 27 in *Parang*.

The number of poems is not surprising, considering the length of time Sheena has been involved in poetry. Sheena got started in performance poetry and spoken word through workshops organized by the British Council, and since then she has been writing and performing frequently. The title of this collection, *Rhymes for Mending Hearts*, suggests an intention for the work to be therapeutic. I find it does not communicate therapy, rather they communicate conflict. Reading the poems on the page, I get the impression of a speaker whose sense of self is being pulled in various directions. In this collection, the self reacts, rejects and responds to various claims on identity; sex, nationality, and religion are themes that emerge frequently.

Body parts are prominently referenced in *Rhymes*: Sheena aggrandizes tongues,

hearts, nails, crevices, claws, groin, head, eyes, nose into signifiers for the claims society makes towards the self. In my experience as a performance poet, I find that the body is an important tool to help you communicate with the audience. It is the first thing that the audience sees on the stage before the poem is heard. Performers often become very self-aware of their body; beginning performers communicate their unease by shrinking, bowing or speaking softly and quickly. As viral videos of talent shows depict, audiences are shocked when the physical presence of the performer conflicts with the performance itself: a deep-voiced black man sings soprano, a six-year old girl sings heavy metal. The importance of the body in performance poetry makes the constant references to body parts in *Rhymes* unsurprising: what comes to my mind is the image of a performer who directs the audience's attention (which is already drawn to her body the moment she emerges on stage), negotiating the terms by which the presence of the body should be received.

The best example of this kind of poem is "Moles."

I have one on the middle of my forehead
one on the corner of my right eye
one under my bottom lip
one on the left side of my chest
one on my finger and
one on the surface of my sole

In "Moles," the placement of moles on the speaker's body becomes a method of social identification, turning the speaker into a recipient of "mean names" in her childhood. Eventually, the speaker takes ownership of the moles, allowing them

to serve as vehicles for the speaker to morph into various identities:

when I saw the beautiful
Kuan Yin and Green Tara
I knew that just like them
my mole is a third eye
endowed with divine power

Using the moles she transforms and takes on identity claims. "Sheena the Muslim would morph into Sheena the Hindu," turning childhood taunts and misconceptions into statements of power:

for I am the Trimurti
I have the beginning, the middle
and the ending inside of me

The transformation of religious identities in "Moles" touches on another recurring theme in Sheena's work: religious identity. As a lover of Rumi who has spent several years in the International Islamic University, Sheena's poetry shows how strongly her religious views shape her aesthetics. Some are accessible to someone without an Islamic background: "A Conversation with Ustazi" depicts an argument between an earnest young believer and her religious teacher in a way that many, religious or not, can relate to. Some are not so accessible. One strophe in "Dialogue in 3 Tongues" is written entirely in Arabic and in "Monologue 01.001.0001" the speaker refers to herself as "Al-Rajam, Al-Maksiat and An-Nar," terms that probably have theological weight on top of their linguistic ones.

I am not enough of an expert of Rumi to say how much of his thought and style has influenced Sheena's poetry, but it is interesting to draw parallels between Rumi and the speaker in *Rhymes*. Just as the speaker is

constantly negotiating claims on her identity, responding to those who seek to control expressions of religious identity, Rumi too has been a subject of controversy in Islam. (Rumi is associated with Sufism—also known as *Tasawwuf,* the ascetic practice of dwelling on the beauty of the One God and intimacy with Him—and its acceptance in Islamic thought varies from one *madhab*, or denomination, to another; some accepting him as a crucial aspect of Islamic thought and others rejecting him as a danger to the faith.) Consider the poem "What to answer back when they say your dancing is haram." The speaker's dance is regarded as "haram" by "faithful men," and the speaker responds by invoking Wordsworth's dancing daffodils, Kunta Kinte, Hang Tuah and Jebat, and Rumi's whirling dervishes. It strikes me that both the speaker and Rumi occupy a space in religion where the boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable have to be constantly negotiated.

It is here that we eventually arrive at the inevitable theme that runs through all Malaysian writing: the question of nationality and nation-building. In Malaysia, debates on acceptable religious expression challenge state-sanctioned, official interpretations, because faith, like race, is a powerful part of the Malaysian identity. There is a significant amount of poetry in *Rhymes* responding to claims on national identity. Among them are two poems named "Negaraku": one is a spoken word piece where lines of the national anthem are layered with mentions of Teoh Beng Hock, Ahmad Sarbaini and Altantuyaa Sharibuu. The other is a more subdued work where the speaker observes a group mouthing

the words. Both deal with the sense of disillusionment and disappointment a Malaysian citizen feels when someone challenges his or her sense of ownership and belonging to the country.

I find these works less engaging than others. Perhaps I am simply tired of reading Malaysian writing that ceaselessly discusses the never-ending topic of Malaysian nation-building. They do not export well beyond our borders. Of course, in performance poetry, there is another reason for this theme's popularity: politics is common ground between the poet and the audience. Yet a passionate response from audience is not an indication of literary merit. In time, the overbearing fascists who govern so much of our lives will eventually—like great Roman emperors suddenly doubling up with surprising fragility—die; if our literature is so invested in their weight, then it will die with them. If our civilization is to survive, our literature needs to resonate with more universal, human concerns.

There is one poem related to nation-building that I liked very much. "Abang (Dedicated to E.T.H.)" is one of Sheena's early poems and it is written as a tribute to the poet Ee Tiang Hong, mourning his decision to migrate from Malaysia. I liked it because it seemed to be one generation of Malaysian poets calling out to another.

Rhymes for Mending Hearts *is published by Ianslip Books. Visit selutbooks.com to order a copy.*

As the prow of the boat cuts through the water heading towards the sea, I think of the past, which is wet with sea water

A photo essay by Azzief Khaliq

In that order they become a rough, perspectively(?) and temporally incorrect panorama that, given the low fidelity of the camera and the scanning imperfections (and the fact that those photos were taken 3 years ago in a kampung and state I only visit during raya but not anymore) could probably be massaged into something about memory, etc.

—Azzief Khaliq



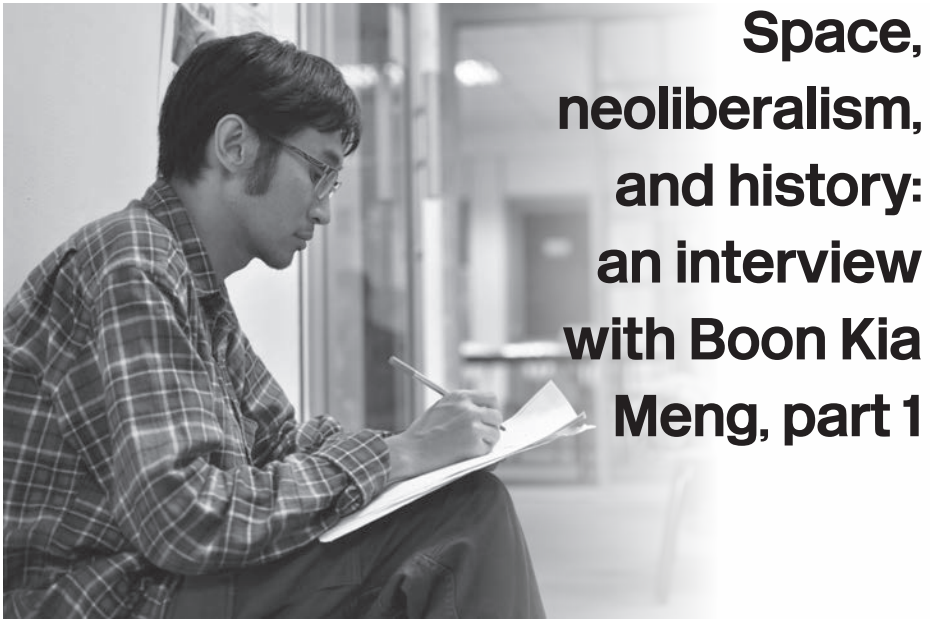












Space, neoliberalism, and history: an interview with Boon Kia Meng, part 1

An interview by ZH Liew

Boon Kia Meng is a filmmaker, theorist, and activist. His documentary "MCM': Utopia Milik Siapa?" examines the dynamics of capitalism in Malaysia by focusing on the housing issue. He is currently working on a project about the history of the Malaysian Left.

During our conversation, we discussed both the documentary and the significance of space and history (such as the Jalan Sultan/MRT issue). In doing so, we ended up trying to get at the heart of neoliberalism in Malaysia, and how its relentless logic has transformed the very landscape of the country.

Key notions that drove the conversation is the idea of the public versus the private; and what implications increasing commodification has for society. In part 1, we discuss neoliberalism and its manifestations in Malaysia.

ZH: *How did you first get interested in spatial and economic investigations?*

KM: It started in 2011, there was a group—it was just a random call on Facebook. I asked if anyone out there was interested in reading Karl Marx's *Capital Volume 1*. A bunch of us came together, and we found social theorist and geographer David Harvey's lectures free online, so a small group grew from there.

This connected with the opportunity that came later, from the Freedom Film Festival. I had written a proposal to look at the Malaysian political economy, but after discussions with the producers, I scaled it down. I thought: "How can I craft the story within the constraint of 30 minutes," and then I said: "okay, why not look at housing?"

If the hypothesis is plausible, then if we take a slice of urban life, this layer should reveal some fundamental processes going on in Malaysia. If you take housing as one aspect of this complex gathering of forces for how Malaysian society is transforming itself, at least in terms of the physical landscape, then it should reveal what is the fundamental logic that drives the entire process. Once I decided to look deeper into the issue, I discovered there is a sense that housing prices are far beyond what most young Malaysians can afford. Most of the time, you look at the economy in very abstract terms, via GDP, unemployment, inflation; but

I think Harvey's approach is very interesting, as he ties together abstract economic developments with spatial ones, particularly in a city like Kuala Lumpur.

In the documentary, you were looking at the housing issue; is there a reason why you chose this as opposed to other issues related to space?

The film had to be tied to a human rights issue for the competition, and that set the film's constraints. I thought about how housing is clearly a basic need, and if you talk about the language of rights, it's entrenched in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the right to shelter and housing is one of the fundamental rights. And I think that brings home the paradox, because we are talking about a basic need which has now been commodified. Housing is no longer provided to meet a basic need, it is produced for the market; no longer for use value, but for exchange value.

Marx's concepts are particularly insightful in opening up our understanding of how we organize society. If we look at these two concepts that are used in *Capital Volume 1*, he talks about how the commodity can be seen as a form of use value, but also as a form of exchange value; so what we have now, in the context where people cannot afford houses, is where the exchange value dimension has taken precedence over the use value—one can argue precisely that would be the logic of capitalism.

That's interesting, because much criticism of capitalism today deals with how it takes basic human needs and makes them marketable—for example, healthcare, education, are now becoming more and more privatized.

In Malaysia, which areas are subject to this? Do you have a particular picture in mind?

To be fair, we have a very hybrid form of political economy. There is a measure of state intervention, but at the same time there is also a growing neoliberalization in the structure of our economy. It's a mistake to say that the state doesn't play a role, but what you said is happening; basic needs are undergoing more marketization. The state is trying to divest itself of the need to provide for the people. When it comes to education, housing, healthcare—these key areas have undergone major privatization, we have seen much more of market forces being allowed to dictate how basic goods should be provided to the people. We did have a strong interventionist state that came out of the NEP in the '70s, but it's less and less active when it comes to providing these basic goods.

What is neoliberalism, in a very basic sense?

It's a complex question, but what neoliberalism actually does, as opposed to what it propagates as an ideology to the world, are two different things. Let's start with the ideological aspect. The ideological beliefs propagated by neoliberal or libertarian type philosophies go back to Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, who were inspired by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek—they cluster around the assumption that the state is inherently inhibitive to human freedoms. And economic freedom, which means enterprise, cannot thrive unless the state is rolled back, which is exactly what the Thatcher and Reagan governments did.

So you want a free market,

and this desire is couched in the language of freedom, of enterprise and property. But of course it has to include that full set of freedoms such as the liberty of the person. But if you scrutinize the liberty of the person deeper, a certain subjectivity emerges, which is a possessive, accumulative individual. It assumes the kind of individual who owns property, who puts these properties into use—what in Marxist terms you would call, the means of production. You can own these means of production and use them for productive economic ventures. At the end of the day it also means you should be protected in your rights over the profits that come out from those enterprises. That's the ideology that neoliberalism propagates. But in practice, a neoliberal state is no less authoritarian than the kinds of states that neoliberals supposedly critique.

In the last twenty years, if you look at most states that adopt the neoliberal ideology, policing has equally increased. In fact, at critical moments where the neoliberal model suffers, and its hegemony gets challenged, the state will resort to repression to put down those protests, like what we see in the UK: the cuts in state funding for universities, and the austerity policies against state public expenditure; you see this in Rio de Janeiro, a city which has undergone major neoliberalization; the Erdogan government and the Gezi Park issue in Turkey, tied to urban development and privatization of what used to be public spaces. These events triggered social protests, and we see that social protest is met with heavy police repression. This is what neoliberalism does in practice, despite its so-called championing of liberties; it champions

liberties of property and private enterprise, but not other values that are being defended, for example, the value of public spaces, or a notion of the commons.

Basically there's a kind of paradox to what neoliberalism calls freedom; it's a freedom of a particular kind, freedom to consume, to own property. And when you challenge that idea of freedom, you are repressed. In both its ideological and actual happenings, it's very contradictory.

That's right. One of the leading think tanks in Malaysia, IDEAS, consider themselves libertarian. Their main critique against the Malaysian state is that there's too much regulation—we need to roll back the state. They champion more private schools, the Swedish or British model of charter schools where parents are allowed to dictate what is the curriculum. The basic idea they're trying to propagate in Malaysia is that most of the problems in society are state-driven, so the way to solve our problems is to get the state out. But I see this as throwing out the baby with the bathwater, because the state isn't inherently bad if it gets involved in certain provisions; it's a very ambiguous entity, depending on the social forces that have control over it. Sometimes it could be the elite, sometimes the masses, depending on who is stronger at any one historical moment.

For instance, the state is instrumental in providing basic goods; because if you left the capitalist, individually or collectively, alone to dictate the market there are investments they do not see as part of their accumulative strategy, such as schools. Companies draw on labour, what in neoliberal language

they call human capital. But if you look at what it takes to reproduce yourself as a class, meaning the expenditure I need as a working person to ensure that I have a decent comfortable life and am functional biologically to return to work day after day, the position of working-class people in neoliberal societies is increasingly unstable.

Reproducing workers requires a lot of expenditure. The capitalist should subsidize all of your domestic needs, whether it's food, clothing, or retraining skills, instead of just paying your basic wage, because you are an asset to them. More of the cost of reproducing workers is now borne by the worker himself, which was borne by the state in the past. In a sense, the capitalist class has an indirect subsidy from the state, when, say, education is fully funded by the state and the skills are used for private enterprise; but the less the state provides for education, and if businesses don't fund this schooling or training process, this means more of the social cost is borne by the individual worker and their families. So when IDEAS argue for less of the state, this actually benefits the more powerful, moneyed or propertied interests in society. Only a Marxist analysis reveals those hidden costs and who is actually bearing them. This is a fundamental insight from Marx: if all these social relations between employers, the state and workers are seen from just the realm of exchanges and exchange value, you only see the appearance of freedom.

Do you have a sense of the history of neoliberalism in Malaysia? Where would you place a starting point?

One of the real estate experts that we interviewed in the film hits the nail on the head

by saying that everything began during Mahathir's period. In a recent lecture by Professor Terence Gomez, the professor charts neoliberalism as beginning to get a foothold through Dr Mahathir's administration. If we look back at his tenure as prime minister, particularly in the '80s, privatization began in a very massive way. And it was clear that he gained inspiration from Thatcher. In the first couple of years when he came to office, he did have an anti-British economic policy; it was about Looking East. But there was a recession in the mid-'80s, and he used the recession to restructure society into its more liberal form—a lot of liberalization of the NEP happened during his time. He liberalized education, for example, and private universities began to have a much larger role during his tenure. Healthcare as well.

At the same time, it seems that the libertarian response is due to a history of—let us call it, crony capitalism in the state, particularly what we saw in the Mahathir era. The libertarian response to this situation is to say "remove the state," and let the private sector do its job. What do you think of this argument?

One of the IDEAS staff actually wrote a response to my documentary, saying that the problem is not capitalism, but cronyism. I've thought over this issue, and I think the libertarian critique prevents a deeper understanding of the issues involved.

To me, the libertarian fails to see, or doesn't see, anything wrong with the notion of exploitation of labour. Some people say that Malaysia is not a capitalist country, because they see the preponderance of rent-seeking—getting contracts without needing to compete



Kia Meng (right) working out the sequence of events for "MCM"

for them—in the Malaysian economy, but the point is, even if you get the contract, you need to exploit labour to create wealth, and Malaysia is capitalist as long as enterprises employ labour and extract surplus value. This is my argument with the IDEAS guy, who said that the problem with housing is not capitalism but state intervention. One thing I tried to highlight in the film is that the working class, in the case of housing, is made up of mostly foreign labour. Workers in the construction industry don't even have minimum wage, and that's the capitalist process working right before our eyes, where you pay really low wages to maximize profit. This

happens even if a contractor gets the contract through a rent-seeking way, rather than "competing" with other tenders in a so-called open market in a libertarian utopia, that they would wish to see in Malaysian society.

The libertarian and neoliberal picture obscures more complex processes that are happening. If you just blame it on the state, and your solution is to remove regulation and state provision for basic needs, then you take away political society—what you have left is just individuals, families, and private enterprises. And if we look at these private enterprises, what you have are big monopolies, big corporations, banks, financial institutions, and within that framework who is the most free to actualize choices? What the libertarians are pushing for is a certain domination of individuals and citizens by this private interest of corporations and banks. It's a class interest that they fail to acknowledge.

So you're saying that, even if you remove the state, you will still have this inequality, regardless of state involvement; it just makes the class difference clearer.

That's right, and maybe a different elite will be created. Of course, now in Malaysia, the financial and industrial elite are tied to the state. They need rent-seeking opportunities. IDEAS, some of their propositions are accepted by Pakatan Rakyat, so PR adopts anti-trust laws as one of their policy platforms, and they want to break up monopolies. This is perhaps laudable, in contrast to the kind of state rentier businesses that we have, which are inefficient from a market rationalization standpoint, but this still does not address the wealth

inequality between the working and bourgeois classes.

In Malaysia, the measure of our income inequalities is massive, one of the highest in Asia. So, with these initiatives, perhaps there is more leveling among the propertied classes, but not between the top 20% and the other 80% of the country. Wages have stagnated for the last 15 years, and that is a class issue. In fact, PEMANDU and other think tanks like REFSA did a study—the share of the produced product, the Gross National Income, which goes to profits and wages—profits are 72% of that total, and wages are only 28%. That's very bad in comparison with what workers in South Korea or Japan get, where the relative shares are 40–60% or 45–55%, close to a half-half partnership between capital and labour. In Malaysia, corporations take home 72%, and workers only 28%.

There are many factors for this surprising difference, such as the lack of union strength in Malaysia. All this ties back to our history—there was union busting, de-unionization, co-opting of the official unions. Also the ideological beliefs of the working class changed; one should query a deal where we only take home 28%. Either a large proportion of our working people are not conscious of such a discrepancy, or there is the belief that if we work hard enough, we can make it; the equivalent of the American dream. This rather individualistic ideological construct motivates the working class in Malaysia.

Next issue: Part 2, on ideology and the history of the Left in Malaysia.



Contributors

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