

# “A TIME OF GREAT TENSION”

## Memory and the Malaysian Chinese Construction of the May 13 Race Riots

By Kelly Jones

On May 13th 1969, decades of political and ethnic pressures exploded after a contentious general election, changing Malaysia’s capital city of Kuala Lumpur from a bustling cityscape into a racial battleground. Majority Malay and minority Chinese would clash for weeks afterward, leaving behind an estimated two hundred dead and a further five hundred wounded. This paper examines a variety of Malaysian Chinese constructions of the race riots in the decades afterward, piecing together the thoughts and feelings held towards a racially traumatic event that still holds sway in the current turbulence that is Malaysia’s political sphere. Using essays, nonfiction, literature, and surveys from those who had lived through the riots, we see for all the lack of a cohesive narrative and general reticence regarding the riots that while the “winner” may create history, the “loser” can develop powerful, flexible lessons for the future.

## I. Introduction

On May 13th, 1969, my mother and her brothers hid underneath their beds in their Petaling Jaya home while sounds of a race riot raged outside, her parents clutching sticks as their only weapons as they waited by the door for attackers. She was eight at the time. There was a lot to fear that night; throughout the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and its townships, Malays killed Chinese in the streets and in their homes, as well as burned down Chinese shophouses, while Chinese secret societies killed Malays in revenge. When the military arrived, they allegedly fired upon the Chinese as well. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the prime minister of Malaysia, called a state of emergency and locked down all of West Malaysia in curfews, while families who had lost their homes took shelter in a stadium. By the time the riots officially ended in July, it was a different world in Malaysia—the National Operations Council under Tun Abdul Razak now controlled the country, and would continue to do so until 1971, when Razak would become the next prime minister.

I argue that Malaysian Chinese have not been able to construct a cohesive narrative for themselves regarding the May 13 race riot for the following reasons. First among these is that it would be detrimental to the government's integrity. This is due to the contradictions inherent in a government that understands it governs a multicultural society but whose constitution assumes that the Malay people deserves special rights as "sons of the soil." Second is entrenched within the construction of Malaysia itself, colonized again and again and ruled by the British as a plural society above all, with all ethnicities kept separate from one another, until British Malaya was conquered by the Japanese during the second world war. The forced interaction, with transactions between the Malays and Chinese generally negative in nature, led the two groups to be suspicious towards each other. Finally, there has been a certain amount of nervousness among large swaths of Malaysian Chinese, where a fear of retaliation by the Malay-majority government has led to leaving the past alone for the sake of a more peaceful future.

Despite these reasons, I would however also argue that Malaysian Chinese have created internal and individual constructions regarding the May 13 riots. After the events of the riots there have been English-language publications by Malaysian Chinese regarding the riots and their own analysis of them, though I note that only two books were published in Malaysia proper. Both of these books, historical and political analysis of the Malaysia leading up to the riots, are more fully studied in the second chapter of this thesis and illustrate the effect of time on the changing attitudes towards approaching the riots and verbalizing criticism of the government's treatment of the situation. As more Malaysian Chinese of the current generation decide to confront the past and the government allows more publication of these constructions, we may see in the future more people publicly engage with the events surrounding the riots.

This thesis will discuss the May 13 riots and Malaysian Chinese constructions of the event in three chapters. The first will delve into the history of Chinese and Malay relations within the various colonial and political constructs of the region that is now Malaysia, from British Malaya, the short-lived Malayan Union, the Federation of Malaya, and finally the independent nation of Malaysia. This chapter will also discuss the May 13 riots through both official governmental documentation as well as foreign documentation. The second chapter will focus on Malaysian Chinese literary constructions of the riots through nonfiction and fiction. Finally, the third chapter looks at the words and thoughts of Malaysian Chinese today regarding both their personal memories of the riots, as well as the current status of Malaysian Chinese in the Malaysia of 2013, in order to understand how Malaysian Chinese perceive themselves in Malaysian society.

## II. Non-Chinese Constructions Of The Chinese In Malaysian History

### A. Before May 13—Separate Societies

Sino-Malay distrust runs like a thread through the nation’s recent history.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying factors of the May 13, 1969 race riots did not start on May 10th, when the Opposition coalition, representing mainly Chinese and Indians, won an unprecedented number of seats in Parliament from the Malay-led UMNO and its Alliance coalition. They did not start in 1963, when delicate negotiations allowed Singapore, a majority Chinese island-state, to join the new country of Malaysia only if Sarawak and North Borneo (later renamed Sabah) did as well, keeping the overall population Malay-dominant. They did not start during World War II, when the Japanese invaded British Malaya under the auspices of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, extorting and torturing the Chinese population while comparatively leaving the Malays be. Nor did they start during the British colonization, when Chinese businessmen controlled the flow of money while Malay sultans leased and sold their land to the British, who all the while kept the racial groups apart and within their ghettos. Yet all these events factor into the Malaysia that was swept up into a frenzy of racial violence that left an undeterminable number dead, injured, jobless and homeless—violence mostly aimed at the Malaysian Chinese minority.

The Malaysia that was part of British Malaya from the nineteenth century until it gained independence in 1957 was a segregated one. As J. S. Furnivall remarks in his definition of the plural society, “The fundamental character of the organization of a plural society as a whole is indeed the structure of a factory, organized for production, rather than of a State, organized for the good life of its members.”<sup>2</sup> British Malaya, like all colonies, had as its dominant purpose in the collection of raw goods and resources to be sent back to Britain for further cultivation. The residents of a plural society are less national citizens than workers placed for maximum gain on behalf of the colonizer. Because this placement was by ethnicity rather than individual ability, members of a plural society are far more invested in the efforts and rewards granted to their own racial group compared to the needs of other racial groups; they in fact will see other racial groups as rivals, an important factor in the relations between the Malays and Chinese as Malaysia worked its way towards independence in the twentieth century. An example of this plural state can be seen in Victor Purcell’s description of the creation of Singapore, as “Raffles plann[ed] his town and allot[ed] areas to Chinese, Klings, Bugis, Malays . . .”, moving the Chinese from “the other side of the river where they had located themselves and form a new village from the bridge down to the river on the site of the present Boat Quay.”<sup>3</sup> This need for control of the living spaces and movement would ensure that the various ethnic groups of British Malaya would be kept separate from each other, disallowing the sort of mingling that could have fostered greater understanding between the races and perhaps foment dissent against the British.

Only during World War II would life in British Malaya change. The Japanese invasion of British Malaya took just three months before the weak British defense capitulated. This led to a chaotic three years under Japanese rule which included “the segregation of the Chinese

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1 The National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy: A Report* (Kuala Lumpur: The National Operations Council, 1969), 15.

2 J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1944), 450.

3 Victor Purcell, *The Chinese in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 71.

masses and the city was divided into ‘concentration sections,’” while so-called Communists were purged in “a mass execution lasting for days...estimated variously as between 40,000 and 100,000” in Singapore, along with the extortion of Chinese throughout British Malaya, who were “told that a ‘gift’ of \$50,000,000” would be accepted by the Japanese.<sup>4</sup> In direct opposition to the treatment of the Chinese, the Japanese set a more moderate policy towards the Malays, allowing them more political power as well as recruiting Malays into the police and military “to maintain security against the Malayan Peoples’ Anti-Japanese Army” (MPAJA) run by the Chinese-dominated Malaysian Communist Party.<sup>5</sup> The National Operations Council, who wrote the official government white paper regarding the cause and aftermath of the May 13 riot, contends that in the few months between the Japanese surrender and the British arrival, the MPAJA “held kangaroo courts, committed atrocities, executed many Malays and Chinese” and that “the torture and killing of large numbers of innocent Malays became an episode that indelibly imprinted in Malay minds the dangers of Chinese ascendancy.”<sup>6</sup>

Interethnic strife only grew when the British returned with the Japanese surrender, ready to organize the Malaya states and the Straits Settlement into a unified multiethnic country that could eventually be led to independence. This was to be done through the creation of the Malayan Union, which would “integrate the large Chinese community and the smaller Indian one into a Malayan polity with a sense of ‘Malayaness.’”<sup>7</sup> To do this, the British wanted a majority of Chinese and Indians to receive citizenship, have positions in the government, and for the Malay sultanates to only have power over matters of Islam and “forfeit their positions as heads of their respective states.”<sup>8</sup> While the sultans initially were willing to accede to this, the Malay population protested with such vehemence that the sultans decided to keep their power. The British were also stymied by their own actions, as they had alternatively enacted both pro-Malay policies and pro-non-Malay policies during colonization, alienating both sides from the British and each other.

In 1947 the plan for a Federation of Malaya to replace the Malayan Union was created, one that would include “all the Malay States and the British colonial settlements of Penang and Malacca . . . but exclude Singapore.”<sup>9</sup> It was a compromise in which citizenship was limited to those who lived in Malaya, Malay representation was reduced to 22 out of 100, and “British (external) authority still could be expected to enforce the parameters of legitimate conflict among the communal groups (and more specifically the Malays and Chinese).”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Communist Chinese would begin an insurgency within Malaya, inducing future Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman to write in 1948 that “terrorism in Malaya is solely the work of the Chinese Communists and . . . it could be easily crushed if the rest of the Chinese population would cooperate more fully with the authorities. The blame for continued activities of the terrorists must therefore be attributed indirectly to the other Chinese.”<sup>11</sup> This would foretell the official government position decades later on the May 13 riots, a position in contention today.

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4 Ibid, 250-252.

5 In-Won Hwang, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 32-33.

6 The National Operations Council, *Tragedy*, 8. Bold used in original text.

7 Ariffin Omar, “The Struggle for Ethnic Unity in Malaya after the Second World War,” in *Multiethnic Malaya: Past, Present and Future*, by The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre and MiDAS@UCSI University, 2009), 45.

8 Ibid, 46.

9 Purcell, *Chinese*, 287.

10 Karl von Vorys, *Democracy without Consensus: Communalism and Political Stability in Malaysia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 82.

11 As quoted by von Vorys, *Democracy*, 88-89. Original attribution to Arun Kumar Banerjee, “Constitutional Development in Malaya since 1945” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Calcutta, 1970), 127.

The final event to be covered in this section is the creation of the nation-state of Malaysia in 1963, in particular the politics behind the inclusion of Chinese-majority Singapore, which would be ejected from Malaysia in 1965 following two massive race riots in 1964 between the Chinese and Malays. Indeed, Tan Tai Yong argues that Tunku Abdul Rahman, who became Malaya’s first Prime Minister with its independence in 1957, “was never an advocate of merger with Singapore” and only was convinced to do so because he feared that “Singapore would turn communist and the contamination would spread both to the Malayan peninsula” and further beyond into the rest of island Southeast Asia.<sup>12</sup> Quoting Lee Kuan Yew, prime minister of Singapore, “The Tunku had all along opposed the idea of a merger . . . He was basically fearful that the Chinese majority in Singapore might join with the Chinese minority in the Federation to the detriment of the interests of the Malays.”<sup>13</sup> Only by accepting the former Borneo states of North Borneo (later Sabah) and Sarawak did the Tunku relent, as the indigenous peoples were considered as Malay and would allow for a greater overall Malay population over the Chinese. This bolstered Tunku Abdul Rahman’s plan for incorporating a common identity, which Tan Tai Yong concludes meant that “Greater Malaysia was conceived as a federation of Malaya and Borneo territories primarily, in which Singapore would not be an integral part.”<sup>14</sup> That Singapore could be so easily pushed out of Greater Malaysia just two years later seems to validate this claim.

Although the general history of racial interaction in Malaya and Malaysia speaks prominently to that of separated, exclusive ethnic groups in the political realm, it must also be noted that this is not the only existing view. Kalpana Sharma strongly asserted in 1987 that “in the immediate post-independence period there was a general consensus amongst the races and a genuine optimism about a stable multi-racial future for Malaysia,” which ended as a consequence of the aftermath of the May 13 riots.<sup>15</sup> It must be acknowledged that a great deal of Malaysian history in English is written by foreign, usually Western writers and journalists, which leads to a certain amount of “outsider’s perspective” that colors the racial elements in a more sensationalist tinge. Despite this, there is an acknowledged heightened sense of racialization that has pitted Malaysia’s ethnic groups against each other in the political sphere, if not in the personal day-to-day lives of Malays, Chinese, and Indians in the various stages of Malaysia before 1969. Sharma’s contention of “general consensus” must be seen as adding complexity to the overall situation, rather than a rejection of the history as stated.

## B. *One Week: The 1969 General Election and the May 13 Riot*

The terrorist Communists have worked out their plan to take over power.<sup>16</sup>

By 1969 Malaysia had already endured multiple racial riots, from a Chinese-Communist insurgency just after the formation of the Federation of Malaya, the Maria Hertogh riots in Singapore in 1950 that incited Muslim Malays, the 1964 Malay-Chinese riot in Singapore that would oust the nation-state from the recently created nation of Malaysia, as well as multiple

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12 Tai Yong Tan, *Creating “Greater Malaysia”: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 5.

13 Ibid, 49. Original attribution to Lee Kuan Yew.

14 Ibid, 182.

15 Kalpana Sharma. “Malaysia: Bogey of Racial Tension,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 22, No. 51 (December 1987), 2203.

16 As spoken by Tunku Abdul Rahman in his State of Emergency bulletin. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, *May 13: Before and After* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press Ltd, 1969), 105.

skirmishes involving Chinese-led Communist and Socialist groups from Kuala Lumpur to Penang to the Malaysia-Thailand border.<sup>17</sup> Many of these riots not only had a racial component to them, but also aspirations of political control, particularly by what Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman termed “the insidious evil of Communism,” and a “political cancer” whose ideals were “fundamentally opposed” to “our chosen way of life.”<sup>18</sup> Seen here is a study of opposites, if not opposition, where the “our” is spoken by a Malay prince and head of government and the malignant “political cancer” of the Malayan Communist Party and their attendant left-wing groups are chiefly populated by the Chinese. Any distinction made between the “evil” Communists and the regular Chinese citizen would become blurred by both the figurative and literal blood spilled during the second week of May in 1969.

The events leading to the May 13 riot are best split by day: the funeral procession of May 9th, the third General Election (GE3) on May 10th, and the victory parades of the DAP and Gerakan on May 11th and 12th. The official government report on the riot mentions the first of these in a short section labeled “Engineered Tension,” in which a young Chinese worker was killed on the 4th by the police after an incident that started with himself and two other workers “sighted painting anti-election slogans” in the Kuala Lumpur township of Kepong.<sup>19</sup> The young man’s body was kept in the Chinatown district in Kuala Lumpur and a funeral procession was to take place originally on May 10th, but because of the election on the 10th it was instead to be held on Friday, May 9th. This led to a massive procession which “an estimated number of ten thousand persons took part and marched through the center of Kuala Lumpur,” where the National Council Report unemotionally states that “they chanted Maoist slogans, sang “the East is Red,” and displayed portraits of Mao Tse-tun[g] and the Red flag,” while chanting death threats in Malay.<sup>20</sup> Tunku Abdul Rahman’s depiction of the event in his book features witness reports, timestamped movements of the funeral procession, and pictures of the procession with their signs alternatively praising Communism and directing hate comments in Malay. While the event heated tensions, ultimately it ended without violence and GE3 took place the next day.

The results of GE3 did not change the face of the government; however, it was the first time UMNO had won less than 50% of the total vote. The Alliance, composed of UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Association (MIC), had to contend with three new multi-racial Opposition parties, of which the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan Party were particularly notable, as well as the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), a conservative Malay-led party that accused UMNO of “selling out the Malays to the Chinese.”<sup>21</sup> By the counting of the vote it was clear that the Alliance, especially the MCA, had lost much of its hold against the new parties; the MCA “lost all but 13 of the 33 constituencies it contested. The opposition had collected more than two-thirds of the urban vote.”<sup>22</sup> Despite this, the Alliance still held a simple majority, one that the Opposition parties hoped to finally defeat in the next General Election. While this was a heady moment for the Opposition, it encouraged fear in the Malay populace of a future in which they would be subjugated by the minorities and lose the benefits they had set for themselves.

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17 Felix V. Gagliano, *Communal Violence in Malaysia 1969: The Political Aftermath* (Athens: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1971), 7-9.

18 Al-Haj, *May 13*, 5.

19 The National Operations Council, *Tragedy*, 27.

20 Ibid, 28.

21 Gagliano, *Communal Violence*, 12.

22 Ibid, 14.

The next two days would not quell that fear as Gerakan filed an application on the 12th to allow its victory procession to travel through Kuala Lumpur; the DAP would end up joining as its procession on the 13th did not have the permission of the police.<sup>23</sup> The National Operations Council has a somewhat different account, stating that “the DAP held several processions on Sunday, 11th May, 1969 all of which were without police permits.”<sup>24</sup> The resulting procession was described by the Tunku as “accompanied by acts of rowdyism and hooliganism and in utter defiance of the Police after the main procession had ended,” further extrapolating that the cause of the mass disarray was due to “victory emotions on the loose and—there can be no other explanation—Communists urging them on.”<sup>25</sup> There was also the continuance of insults aimed at the Malays during the various processions, including “”Mati Melayu, sakai pergi masuk hutan!” (Death to the Malays, aborigines go back to the jungle),” “”Kuala Lumpur sekarang China punya,” (Kuala Lumpur now belongs to the Chinese),” and “Melayu keluar—apa lagi dudok sini” (Malays get out—why do you remain here).”<sup>26</sup> Just as the Tunku did in his own account, the official white paper has a particular interest in combining these processions with Communist aims when it states that “a pattern of behaviour similar to the Maoist funeral procession on 9th May was evident.”<sup>27</sup> A new point is also inserted here as the official report makes clear that “the Malay communities in the areas most affected by these insults showed patience and restraint,” as well as “the restraint of the Police” at the way the “non-Malays, particularly the Chinese, had shown arrogance beyond belief.”<sup>28</sup> The comparison between the “arrogant” Chinese and the “patient” Malay lays the groundwork for the official narrative, in which even the average Chinese, though he or she may not be a Communist, was still responsible for earning the violence of the May 13 riots by being the predominant factor in stoking the fires of racial tension between the Malays and the Chinese.

The riot began at around six in the evening of May 13 in the Chinese-majority area of Setapak. The official government report states the initial cause of the riot as such:

The established fact is that some Malays while proceeding to the assembly point on foot and scooters (as the local bus service had apparently stopped) were taunted in Setapak by groups of Chinese and Indians, and this developed rapidly into stone and bottle-throwing incidents between opposing groups ten to fifteen minutes before the outbreak of violence in Kampong Bharu. It was news of this fight that sparked off the clashes in and around Kampong Bharu. The taunts and insults of the previous two days only served to generate the explosive atmosphere.<sup>29</sup>

By the half-hour, Malays had brought the news of the Setapak fight to the UMNO branch office at Jalan Raja Muda; at this point many Malays were doubling back to Gombak for weapons and Chinese and Indians were taunting the Malays in groups. At ten minutes to seven, “several vehicles were already overturned, pushed aside or burning. Three dead bodies were lying on the roadside and, in one of the vehicles, a Chinese businessman executive feigned death until the Police party was close enough” in front of the Menteri Besar’s home.<sup>30</sup> The white paper also

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23 Al-Haj, *May 13*, 75.

24 The National Operations Council, *Tragedy*, 29.

25 Al-Haj, *May 13*, 76.

26 The National Operations Council, *Tragedy*, 29-31.

27 Ibid, 36.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid, 49. Bold in original text.

30 Ibid, 52.

focuses on the activity of Chinese secret societies, stating that they “distributed” weapons such as “parangs, three-pointed spears, bottle bombs, [and] iron pipes” amongst their members and would go on to lead attacks in Malay kampongs.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, Malays barricaded streets and “slashed and killed Chinese occupants” in their cars, while “other groups hunted for Chinese within the kampongs and set their homes and stores on fire”; these fires would convince Malays in their kampongs in Petaling Jaya that “Kampong Bharu was being burned by the Chinese” and by a quarter after seven had “blocked the four-lane federal highway with logs, massacred Chinese and some Indians), then burned their cars.”<sup>32</sup>

While the riots raged throughout Kuala Lumpur, the police and the military worked in conjunction to quell the violence. By May 14 the prime minister had already decided to “proclaim a State of Emergency throughout the country,” which would be officially announced on May 16th, as well as postponing the East Malaysia election indefinitely; he imposed a curfew, while government officials gave relief to those who had either lost their homes or had no stores of food at the Sekolah Hishamuddin stadium.<sup>33</sup> On the administrative level, more power was given to Tun Abdul Razak, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, to also be the Director of the National Operations Council, who would eventually become the next Prime Minister with Tunku Abdul Rahman’s abdication in mid-1970. The Tunku’s recollection also extends to another outbreak of violence on June 28th that began from “a group of Indian youths [who] had thrown stones into a Malay mosque” in Sentul Pasar, which angered the Malays and sparked off a riot that would lead to five deaths.<sup>34</sup> This second outbreak of violence ended after a few days of sparse incidents, and the May 13 riots officially ended in July.

According to the official numbers in the government report, a total of 196 deaths occurred, of which 143 were Chinese, 25 Malays, and 13 Indians; roughly a fourth of all deaths were by gun violence.<sup>35</sup> A further 439 people were injured by guns and other weapons, with over half that number committed against the Chinese.<sup>36</sup> Another table shows that 5,126 Chinese arrests were made out of 9,143 total arrests.<sup>37</sup> The story these official statistics shows further the general narrative of the Malay accounts of the riots, in which violence carried out against the Chinese is also attributed in some way towards the Chinese as well. The greater controversy of these statistics is the relatively low number of deaths and injuries for a riot that can be measured in months, not days, as sporadic accounts of violence in both Kuala Lumpur and Malacca occurred in June; this will be addressed more fully in chapter two. What is important to note for now is that the immediate and official account of the May 13th riots is a wholly Malay narrative, with additions by foreign commentators; Chinese voices in these accounts are predominately placed as hecklers, taunting Malays with visions of futures where they are physically or politically wiped out in favor of a new Chinese hegemony. This leads to a sympathetic historical reading of Malay actions, where the violence they inflict is encouraged due to impudent and “arrogant” Chinese actions, and is further justified because of subversive elements such as Communists and secret societies lurking within the Chinese community in Malaysia as a whole. Chinese victims are not voiced, only placed as short descriptions to prove how the subversive Chinese elements have harmed themselves. It would only be when the Malaysian Chinese began writing about their experiences that more complex constructions would come into play.

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31 Ibid, 54.

32 Von Vorys, *Democracy*, 332-333.

33 Al-Haj, *May 13*, 98-99.

34 Ibid, 114.

35 The National Operations Council, *Tragedy*, 88.

36 Ibid, 89-90.

37 Ibid, 91.

### III. May 13 In Malaysian-Chinese Non-Fiction And Fiction

This chapter focuses on the analysis of Malaysian Chinese constructions of the May 13 riots in English-language nonfiction and fiction. While this is severely limiting because it cuts out the voices of Malaysian Chinese with no English proficiency and leaves only the experiences of those in the middle-class and above, it is also true that the goal of any work written in English is to reach as wide an audience as possible as opposed to a work written only in Chinese. For instance, although both Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and Director of the National Operations Council Tun Abdul Razak were both Malays, the Tunku’s book and the official government report on the May 13 riot were both published in English.

There are only a few nonfictional and literary accounts of the riot that fit this criteria. The first section of this chapter will analyze the introduction and two essays in the 1969 book *The May Tragedy in Malaysia: A Collection of Essays*. The second section examines and compares the 1971 publication of *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* by Datuk Dr. Goh Cheng Teik and his 2013 addendum to the 2007 book *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* by Dr. Kua Kia Soong, while the third section looks at Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* and its form and function in comparison to Goh’s and Kua’s type of nonfiction. The final section will study the conceptualization of the riots within literature through the first part of Lim’s novel *Joss and Gold*.

#### A. *Australia, 1969: Making Sense of Faraway Disaster*

At the tail end of the May 13 riots in July 1969, the Southeast Asia Center at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia released a booklet entitled *The May Tragedy in Malaysia: A Collection of Essays*. This was a concerted effort by Malaysian and Australian students and professors to broaden understanding of the underlying factors involved in the riots, including the historical relationship between the Chinese and the Malays and the 1969 general election, and also featured essays on the political and educational relationship between Malaysia and Australia. Because of its publication date, the essays do not provide a lot of depth on the reasons behind the riots, nor do they have reactions from people on the ground in Malaysia itself; rather, this is a booklet of essays where the writers are simply trying to understand what has happened and why it could happen.

Three Malaysian Chinese writers contributed to the booklet of essays. The first is the introduction, written by Monash University graduate student Lee Kam Hing, and the great majority of its nearly three pages discusses the other essays and their importance to the overall effort of understanding what brought about the riots. Separate from those descriptions are Lee’s own conceptions of a Malaysia where “racial disturbances have taken place before but whereas those had been quickly contained and the blame subsequently apportioned to outside influences, the May riots coming immediately after the elections cannot be so easily explained away and its implications ignored.”<sup>38</sup> This is an interesting statement, considering that the government sources in the first chapter are adamant that much of the “racial disturbances” are the fault of Chinese dissidents as a whole. What is seen here are two separations, with the first being the separation of Malaysian Chinese from the “outside influences” that have assailed Malaysia in the past and

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38 Kam Hing Lee, “Introduction” in *The May Tragedy in Malaysia: A Collection of Essays* (Melbourne: Monash University Malaysia-Singapore Students’ Association, 1969), 1.

the second being Lee's own separation from what has occurred in Malaysia, where he can safely imply that the riots have much to do with the elections in ways that aren't to be "explained away and its implications ignored" as the Prime Minister and the National Operations Council would explain away the consequences as mostly being the fault of Communists, secret societies, and arrogance. Lee here is voicing what other Malaysian Chinese would voice throughout the decades: there is more to the riots than what has been stated as fact.

As the introduction gives brief summaries of each essay in the booklet in turn, it isn't until the very end when Lee gives commentary separate from these descriptions. In this last paragraph, he mentions that the original form of the book was to be as a general introduction of Malaysia to Australians. That the book of essays changed into a discussion of the riots as its overall theme was due to the fact that its contributors "felt that the various issues of the racial problem need to be put across to all Malaysian students in Australia and that a more informed and responsible approach be shared by all."<sup>39</sup> What we are introduced here is a general conceptualization of the riots as a consequence formed by the actions of each of the races in Malaysia, which then is meant to be further disseminated to "all Malaysian students in Australia" in particular rather than the Australian population. What can be drawn from this is that the riots are the responsibility of Malaysians first and foremost, and that there is a special role for Malaysian students in Australia to play. This may be because they were not in the country when the riots occurred, or because of their own "eliteness" that allowed them to study abroad and afford higher education. Whatever the reason, this book of essays espouses a radical shift from the official government position of implicit and explicit blame towards one ethnicity and the parallel reduction of blame for the actions of another and instead informs the reader that they instead must share in the responsibility and the efforts in Malaysia's rehabilitation.

The first of the two essays written by Malaysian Chinese writers is Dr. Wang Gungwu's "Malaysia: An Interim View." In three-and-a-half pages, he succinctly describes the political situation of Malaysia and how the communalism of the riots has greatly altered the political playing field and revealed the weaknesses of the self-conceptualization of Malaysia as a purely multi-racial society without the attendant racial concerns. Wang also shows a respect for the tribulations of the Malaysian government when he states that "the Alliance Government was severely attacked, on the one hand by non-Malays for its multi-racial fiction and, on the other, by the Malays themselves for its multi-racial aspirations."<sup>40</sup> While use of the phrase "multi-racial fiction" reveals disbelief for the Alliance's stated goals as the representative of all peoples in Malaysia, there is at the same time acknowledgement for the difficult place the Alliance had found itself in between the communal biases and needs of the various ethnic groups. Hence the result after the election, where "the voting along communal lines has broken the multi-racial spell" and how it "led to the heightened racial antagonisms between the triumphant non-Malays of the urban parties and the much more insecure Malays of the ruling UMNO party."<sup>41</sup>

And so, while acknowledging the racial tensions which led to the riots, ultimately Wang states that the problem is not merely "a political ideal put on the defensive; nor is it merely a question of one dominant race gravely threatened by the other races," but also that "we are looking at a ruling elite testing its capacity to rule."<sup>42</sup> This is one of the most prominent theories of the reasons behind the May 13 riots in Malaysian Chinese writings and thoughts, in which Chinese

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39 Ibid, 3.

40 Wang Gungwu, "Malaysia: An Interim View" in *The May Tragedy in Malaysia: A Collection of Essays* (Melbourne: Monash University Malaysia-Singapore Students' Association, 1969), 11.

41 Ibid, 11-12.

42 Ibid, 12.

lives were sacrificed for the sake of the Alliance’s political strength. Although this theory has had some shifts in thought, as we will see in later nonfictional accounts of the riots. In Wang’s case, he ends his essay with a particularly ominous statement: “The tragedy is that the demands for the use of force have radically changed the means of achieving multi-racialism and this change is likely to pervert the eventual goals promised the Malaysian people.”<sup>43</sup> In his view, the riots would ultimately bring about increased authoritarianism on behalf of the Alliance government, applying more stringent, racially based controls so that May 13 could never happen again—moving the opposite direction from true multi-racialism and towards increased pluralism and communalism.

In contrast, Monash graduate Loh Chee Hong’s essay, “A Look at the Malaysian Students in Australia,” places its focus firmly on the Malaysian exchange students and the considerations of the different ethnic configurations who study abroad. Most pertinent to this thesis is the general theme of many Malaysian students coming together in the wake of the riots for the sake of “the common goal, that is, to help build a better Malaysia to live in; if not for their own generation, then for the future generations.”<sup>44</sup> The rest of the essay concerns itself with how Malaysian students cope in Australia, and the ethnic breakdowns of interaction due to prior training back home. Yet, there is discussion in the last pages of the essay about the formation, or the lack thereof, of national unity while studying abroad even with an expectation of “a certain degree of in-group cohesion” due to the alienation students may feel in a foreign country. Loh attributes this to the fact that the students are very individualistic in their goals and “very few of them appreciate the national needs or share the common goals which will help to bind them into a cohesive community.”<sup>45</sup> It seems that even studying abroad does not enhance Malaysian national unity, which Loh believes is due to the fact that Malaysia had only existed as a nation for twelve years at that point and that “a common bond of nationality is at present little more than nominal, and ethnic conflict has become part of wider political issues, as it was revealed in the recent elections and the riots.”<sup>46</sup>

Overall, The May Tragedy in Malaysia introduces the immediacy of the riots to the reader as the writers attempt to make sense of the riots. There are few Malaysian Chinese voices, but the ones that are there supply fragments of ideas that will carry on into the Malaysian Chinese consciousness as new writers form new theories and construct the May 13 riots in order to understand their own place in Malaysian society.

### B. *Four Decades of Difference: The Gerakan and the DAP, 1971, 2007, and 2013*

While the first Malay conceptions of the riots in English came out in 1969 with both Tunku Abdul Rahman’s book and the National Operations Council’s official report, it was not until 1971 that the first Malaysian Chinese conception of the riots appeared in English in the form of Datuk Goh Cheng Teik’s *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia*. A 76-page book at its first publishing, in six chapters the book’s progression swiftly moves from the question of pre-1969 Malaysia as a democratic nation, the general election and its results in 1969, the May 13 riots, the aftermath of the riots in the political sphere, and two short analytical chapters on the future

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43 Ibid, 13.

44 Loh Chee Hong, “A Look at Malaysian Students in Australia” in *The May Tragedy in Malaysia: A Collection of Essays* (Melbourne: Monash University Malaysia-Singapore Students’ Association, 1969), 44.

45 Ibid, 49.

46 Ibid, 51.

of Malaysian elections and racial politics. The rest of the book concerns itself with a glossary of political parties existing at the time and appendices of the election results. Forty-two years later on May 3rd, 2013, Goh would upload onto his blog a free downloadable copy of this book, identical to the print version, alongside a new cover note that will also be analyzed here. In the same post he states his reason for re-releasing the book as his wish “to share with all Malaysians particularly the current young generation voters, my book about Malaysia’s Democracy and what happened during the May Thirteenth (5-13) incident.”<sup>47</sup> This was for the benefit of the voters of the upcoming May 5th general election, an election with similar fears to the 1969 general election in terms of voting patterns for the Opposition against UMNO.

The thesis of Goh’s book is that democracy in Malaysia must be altered to fit a country steeped in the ideology of the plural society, as the May 13 riots proves that any political shifts of power from the majority to the minority cannot and will not be tolerated otherwise. In the original 1971 book, he states that “it is apparent that the May Thirteenth Incident cannot be considered either in isolation from the post-election crisis of confidence in democracy or as a consequence only of provocation,” and that this provocation “did not act upon an ordinary state of mind[, but] upon minds charged with anxiety and near-alarm,” the origin of which came from the hostile comments during the Gerakan and Opposition victory rallies. Goh states here that it was especially those that “suggest[ed] that the Malays as a race had lost the Selangor elections” and to therefore remove themselves from Kuala Lumpur and go back to their kampongs.<sup>48</sup> In his 2013 book cover note, he is even more blunt:

May 13 was not an ethnic phenomenon. It was a political occurrence. Only those who were members of UMNO or associated with it were involved. PAS members had nothing to do with May 13.<sup>49</sup>

Goh’s reasoning here is one formed out of communalist logic which follows as such: PAS, being a fundamentalist Malay political group agitating for increased constitutional powers on the behalf of Malays, would surely have intervened on the Malay side had the riot been a matter of race. Therefore, Goh envisions a breakdown of political groups for the sake of communalism first and foremost. However, this reasoning seems somewhat simplistic, as he only seems to have considered PAS officials, who would be easily recognizable, rather than the average party member’s possible involvement. There is no official survey of party membership for those involved in the riots as either agitator or victim, nor for the ones arrested during the riots, so the claim that no PAS members were involved is a specious one. What is true is that, while the riots did not start in front of the UMNO branch office at Jalan Raja Muda, the news was very shortly carried there and many of the UMNO supporters waiting for the start of the victory procession left to involve themselves in the riots, making the riots UMNO-dominant in its beginning stages.

To continue with Goh’s argument on the necessary alteration of democracy in Malaysia, he further goes on to comment that the main problem the May 13 riots revealed would be “the problem of changing the power-configuration without disrupting its equilibrium.”<sup>50</sup> Suggesting

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47 Goh Cheng Teik, “Book: *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia*,” *Democracy in Malaysia*, May 3 2013. <http://datukgohsbooks.blogspot.com/2013/05/book-may-thirteenth-incident-and.html>.

48 Goh Cheng Teik, *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), 39.

49 Goh Cheng Teik, “Book’s Cover Note,” *Democracy in Malaysia*, May 3 2013. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0Bwl9xkj9v2SUQk5GRjNEY2x1WE0/edit?pli=1>.

50 Goh, *Incident*, 39.

that the Malays were not conditioned to cede power and that democracy was only acceptable so long as it was under Malay rule, Goh states that “as soon as signs appeared that suggested that this enjoyment might not be permanent, doubts as to the equity and efficacy of democracy began to emerge.”<sup>51</sup> To assuage these doubts, he believes it would have been better for “the immigrant communities to observe a voluntary restraint . . . to refrain from contesting for power at the polls through essentially communal political organizations” while allowing Malays “for at least one generation the prerogative of holding the premiership and other highly crucial positions in the federal cabinet” in order to acclimate them to future political power shifts.<sup>52</sup> The particular wording of allowing Malays to “progress in political enlightenment and maturity” seem fundamentally identical to British actions a generation or so before, when their extrication from Malaysia and Singapore lasted roughly ten years because the British couldn’t be sure that Malaya could succeed as an independent country.<sup>53</sup> Goh uses comparisons with Indonesia’s political process to argue this and, a few pages later, the idea that UMNO would as well be better served with their own idea of self-restraint, “to forsake the temptation of relying exclusively upon primordial instincts and sentiments in its strategy for retaining power” and instead be a true multi-racial organization in order to retain power.<sup>54</sup>

What we see here is a very measured analysis of the riots as a political consequence, but the disinterest in viewing the riots for its racial aspects is particularly interesting. The labeling of the Chinese and Indians as part of a monolithic immigrant community gives short shrift to the generations of Chinese and Indians who have been born in Malaya since the first movements of trade in the region hundreds and hundreds of years before the Europeans arrived; even the more recent movements of Chinese workers and Indian soldiers into Malaya during British rule who stayed cannot so easily be seen as completely immigrant unless by dint of not being Malay are they considered foreign. However, this may have been the more acceptable view of Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians in 1969 by the Malays, and Goh’s belief that the Chinese and Indians would have done better to exercise restraint and hold back from involving themselves in the Malaysian political structure for the sake of national unity does not paint an image of the man as someone who would have argued the point excessively. It may also have been the viewpoint of many Chinese and Indians who would not have staked their lives for the sake of political freedom or only felt at home in their enclaves and not in Malaysia as a whole.

In 2007 Dr. Kua Kia Soong, a former Petaling Jaya member of Parliament for the DAP, published *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969*. If Goh’s analysis of the riots can be seen as measured, even apologetic regarding Malaysian Chinese and Indian entry into national politicking, Kua’s can be seen as contentious. The back cover of the book declares it “the first credible account of the May 13, 1969 racial riots in Malaysia,” and even goes as far as to call out the ruling government as “these documents clearly show who were responsible for the violence and pose the question why the security forces allowed the violence to go on. It is hoped that the frequently raised ‘spectre of May 13’ by the Barisan Nasional government will be forever put to rest.”<sup>55</sup> Already we are met with bold claims that are in stark opposition to the official documentation, as both the Tunku’s autobiography and the National Operations Council’s white paper fervently declare that the police and military forces acted as promptly and professionally

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51 Goh, *Incident*, 40.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid, 43.

55 Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Petaling Jaya: SUARAM, 2007), back cover.

as possible and were the main reason the riots had ended as so quickly as they did. There is also an accusation of using the May 13 riots for political gain, or as a way to intimidate minorities to accept the status quo. The first lines inside the book are no less pugnacious, as Kua states that “many Malaysians do not believe the official version of this dark episode of Malaysian history which has pinned the blame on the opposition parties for inciting the post-1969 election riots,” and that “the status quo since the imposition of the National Operation Council in 1969 has been one of “Ketuanan Melayu” (Malay Dominance), a racist concept that is alien to the spirit of the Federal Constitution and that tries to justify all kinds of racial discrimination.”<sup>56</sup> In reading these charges, there is a distinct feeling that a book that could go head-on against the official reports could only have been written now.

There are two main claims of interest in the book: the first is the May 13 riots happened as the means in which a political coup d'état would occur, as Tun Abdul Razak wrested control of the country from Tunku Abdul Rahman in the wake of the riots; the second is the official number of fatalities during the riots, a little less than two hundred, was actually greatly deflated and that the true number of casualties were in the multiple thousands. His argument for the first point is that, while the 1969 election results “pointed to a growing polarisation” because it failed to meet the needs of the non-Malay constituencies, “there was absolutely no reason for any spontaneous outbreak of communal rioting as a result of the elections” because they had only lost some support, not the entire election and therefore the government. Kua uses journalist dispatches to form his narrative; although his method's effectiveness is questionable due to reporting biases, there are still lines such as “at Batu Road, a number of foreign correspondents saw members of the Royal Malay Regiment firing into Chinese shop-houses for no apparent reason” to evoke the feeling that something had gone critically wrong.<sup>57</sup> It is difficult to parse the multiple threads Kua weaves with the dispatches he quotes because he seems to speak for his quotes and overstates what he expects them to prove even as he uses them to, presumably, prove his theses. For instance, he alleges that Tun Razak plotted the riots in order to take the prime ministry from the Tunku, but there is no explicit quote from a journalist or diplomat to substantiate this; furthermore, the Tunku himself states very strongly in his autobiography that he wanted Tun Razak to take control of the government for him. The most that can be responsibly argued for is that Tun Razak was well-placed and took advantage of the situation to gain power, but it is overreaching to consider him the mastermind of the riots.

More interesting than its claims are the sources Kua uses for his book, the declassified documents from diplomats around the world as they took in the situation in Kuala Lumpur. It makes it difficult to analyze the book as a work by a Malaysian Chinese author when so much of it is from foreign sources and correspondents. What can be said is that he makes a very bold claim of the riot as a tool of what would appear to be a very successful coup d'état; Tun Razak would control Malaysia as the head of the National Operations Council until 1971, where he would then be Prime Minister until 1976. It is a claim that can be placed in the same line of thinking as Goh's, in which the riots are seen as a political consequence and not a racial one. Here we can aptly see how politics can intersect with ethnicity to create a racial riot that hinges on politics rather than race, yet does not deny ethnicity entirely.

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<sup>56</sup> Kua, *Declassified*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Reece, “Malaysia: Requiem for Democracy?” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 64, No. 21 (18/24 May 1969), 437 - as quoted by Kua in *Kua, Declassified*, 40.

C. *The Reconstruction of Memory: Memoirs as Historical Truth*

The last nonfiction book for this chapter is one of a hybrid, a memoir written by novelist Shirley Geok-lin Lim about her life as an essentially displaced person. Lim is a Malaysian woman of Chinese and Peranakan (Malay-Chinese) descent who always felt more comfortable in her English-based education than in Chinese or Malay and subsequently left Malaysia for graduate school and never really returned. Published in 1996, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (in the Singapore publication the subtitle was *Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, yet another way of revealing her cultural fluidity) would go on to win the American Book Award the next year. Lim's memory, and the cultivation of emotions associated with those memories, gives the memoir an almost fictional twist to her accounts, blurring the line between the literary and the lived-in. This allows us to, in a sense, question the validity of her written truths; a memoir, based on one person's memory, is only reflective of that one person. Nonfiction is built from citations, but ultimately those citations lead right back into a person's memory and ability to account for what they have experienced. It is a primary source in the truest sense of the term.

Lim's first reference to May 13, 1969 happens many years earlier in the chronology of the memoir, when she discusses English education in the context of her Catholic missionary schooling. As a young girl living in Malacca, one of the most famous port cities in Southeast Asia and the landing point of Western colonialism starting with the Portuguese in 1511, a girl's school in a Catholic mission with Eurasian and Chinese nuns was the height of Malaccan Malaysian education in the 1950s and 60s. She states the reason why thusly: "Up to the end of the 1950s, and perhaps right up to the violence of the May 13 race riots in 1969, the educational structure in Malaya was British colonial."<sup>58</sup> There is a sense here that the 'violence' could be attributed to not just the physical attacks of the riots themselves, but also in what they changed in their wake, such as the change from a "British colonial" education to a Malay-based one.

It is chapter seven, "Outside the Empire," that is about her experience of living through the riots while finishing up her Master's at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. The beginning of the chapter is a relentless onslaught of the acts people did or had to consider regarding Malaysia's independence, but as for herself, "I was not so much apathetic as complacent. British education had trained me for the privileged ranks of the Civil Service. Hungry and ragged or socially disgraced, I never doubted that my talents placed me in a meritocracy."<sup>59</sup> And so the chapter focuses on her school life at the University of Malaya, vaguely aware of the political changes creaking on outside of the university but largely unconcerned about them. Singapore's split from Malaysia is punctuated by her weekend adventure to lose her virginity, as "the meaninglessness of [her] sexual encounter . . . appeared enlarged by the violent meaningfulness of the political split between Singapore . . . and Malaysia."<sup>60</sup> She continues to excel in her classes, leaves one fiancé, entangles herself romantically with a professor, then falls in love with a UC Berkeley-educated Malaysian Indian while deciding on a future outside of Malaysia. It is at this time that May 13 comes upon her:

Over the radio, we heard that Malay counter-demonstrators, brought in from the kampongs—their rural villages—to protest against a Chinese postelection victory march, and armed with

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58 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 68.

59 Ibid, 118.

60 Ibid, 122.

parangs and knives, the report said, to defend themselves, had turned violent. Much later, first through rumors and then through foreign news reports, we learned that streets of Chinese shophouses in Kuala Lumpur had been burned down and hundreds of Chinese killed. Later estimates placed the number at about two thousand massacred. The army was called in, but the Malay soldiers had been slow to stop the race riots and had allegedly shot at Chinese instead.<sup>61</sup>

Even after the violence ends, the communalist feelings remain; Lim recounts how the Chinese students and lecturers stayed apart from the Malays, while a Malay student in the same cohort as her states that, “we Malays would rather return Malaysia to the jungle than live with Chinese domination. . . . We don’t need the Chinese. We will be happy to sit on the floor if that’s what it means to do without the Chinese!”<sup>62</sup> Lim expresses that this friend, a daughter of Malay aristocracy, would benefit even more than the average Malay as the bumiputra ideology becomes law, and how she herself felt it better to leave Malaysia entirely rather than “to be informed that I was not an equal citizen, that my community was a “problem,” and that race massacres were an appropriate way of dealing with that problem.”<sup>63</sup> Her final words on the subject are placed to speak for all Malaysian Chinese when she states, “Twenty-five years after this trauma, however, millions of Malaysians of Chinese descent still resident in the country, and thousands more in a global diaspora, continue to bear witness to the ideal of an equitable homeland for all Malaysians.”<sup>64</sup>

I want to underscore the importance of the trajectory of her thoughts and feelings throughout this chapter, because there is a very prominent before and after duology of phases conceptualized here that I think reflects the Malaysian Chinese experience. It is evident that Lim sees the political as it happens, but it is the personal emotions she displays that truly captures the effects of May 13 on the Malaysian Chinese psyche. In perspective, Goh in 1971 is on the other side of the spectrum, reasoning out fault after the fact and explaining what would have been the best concessions to make on both the Chinese and Indian side and the Malay side. Meanwhile, Kua in 2007 has anger and theories but his extensive use of other people’s words do not get at the heart of his own. Lim has reason here, but she also has hurt and confusion. When she reflects back on the Malaysia before 1969, she speaks of a “meritocracy,” a way of living that reflects one’s talents and efforts above their ethnicity or any birthright. It is a privilege to live that way, and she does seem to recognize that; to be able to win scholarships to attend the best university in the country is as much a privilege as it is proof—to herself, at least—that she does live in a world where her talents allow her to succeed. But the riots change that; “rumors and foreign news reports” are the first to inform her that people of her ethnicity are purposefully being attacked, and then others in her same privileged position who are Malay are telling her that this will be the new fact of life, that the meritocracy she has depended on will not be allowed to exist in her homeland anymore. It is why she can speak of a Malaysian Chinese global diaspora, one that she herself is part of, a “people who unwillingly le[ft] their country because of laws that discriminate against them.”<sup>65</sup> It is through the act of leaving that they are able to conceptualize the event that made them leave in the first place.

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61 Ibid, 135.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid, 136.

64 Ibid, 137-138.

65 Ibid, 136.

D. *Fictionalizing Fact: Literature from Reality*

The last part of this chapter is a look at another way Shirley Geok-lin Lim conceptualizes the May 13 riots, this time through her novel *Joss and Gold*. Because Lim experienced the effects of the riots personally, there is a difference in the way she writes about it from a fictional point of view compared to a novelist who did not personally live through the riots but experienced it secondhand from relatives and research from primary or secondary sources. *Joss and Gold* was published in 2001 and is not the first novel written about the riots; Lloyd Fernando, a Malaysian Indian man of Sri Lankan descent who also lived through the riots, wrote *Green is the Colour* in 1993. A twenty-four year gap devoid of any literary conceptualization of the riots suggests a deep sensitivity regarding the event, perhaps that people were unwilling or not allowed to engage with their memories of riots in a public arena. However, the afterword for *Joss and Gold* states that it had first “begun in 1979” and “took over twenty years to complete,” a period of delay attributed to Lim’s “competing commitments as an academic, a writer, activist, wife, and mother” as well as the editing and revising process.<sup>66</sup> To date, Lim is still the only Malaysian Chinese novelist who has published a book in English where the riots play a role in the larger plot of a novel, which seems to signify little interest in conceptualizing the riots for public consumption beyond Malaysian Chinese communities at this point in time, or perhaps a feeling that this still may not be the right time to come out due to political concerns.

The focus here is on the first part of Lim’s novel, which takes place in 1968-1969 in the Petaling Jaya area of Kuala Lumpur. The main viewpoint character in this part is Li An, who is a promising English literature senior at the University of Malaya and married to Yeh Henry, a biology graduate student, and the two live mainly on the largesse of Henry’s father, which includes a home with a maid. The main plot of this part is Li An’s friendship with an American Peace Corps volunteer named Chester Brookfield, which culminates into a one night stand on the night of May 13 while trapped in his apartment during the police curfew. However, the ten chapters of this first part become increasingly focused on mixed marriages, the idea of a national language, and ultimately the meaning of being Malaysian. It is the last of these that I think is crucial in understanding the real-life arguments in play at this time, and due to the multi-racial cast of characters the reader is free to interrogate a number of different claims that Lim the student would have been privy to at this time.

The first is an argument that ensues between Li An, Chester, and Henry while discussing English literature. Chester, the American, makes fun of her for clinging to English when she is a Malaysian Chinese woman with her own culture to focus on, and he goes on to say that what he has learned from his Malay roommates is that “Malay is the only real culture in this country.”<sup>67</sup> When Henry asks him to clarify, as the Chinese also live in Malaysia, Chester states, “The Chinese aren’t really Malaysian, are they? They’re here for the money. They speak Chinese and live among themselves. They could as easily be in Hong Kong or even in New York’s Chinatown.”<sup>68</sup> This naturally has the effect of angering Henry, but Li An’s response is more poignant:

You sound just like the ultra-Malay politicians who want to kick the Chinese out of the country. My mother’s family has been in this country for five or six generations, and some of the Malays are really immigrants who have just arrived from Indonesia in the last few years. You can’t make

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66 Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Joss and Gold* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 267.

67 Ibid, 33.

68 Ibid, 34.

any judgments based on who or what is 'original.' Sure, the Chinese traditions came from China, but Islam came from Saudi Arabia, didn't it? And no one says it's not original. Everything in Malaysia is champor-champor, mixed, rojak. A little Malay, a little Chinese, a little Indian, a little English.<sup>69</sup>

Using Chester to spout what is termed as "ultra-Malay" rhetoric is an example of how information moves and beliefs set in. Because Chester has Malay roommates, he absorbs a certain belief that Malaysia is for Malays and that the Chinese are not willing to integrate with Malaysian society, which in this logic would be in Malay society. As the history of Malaysia is longer than its creation as a nation-state with British assistance or even when the Portuguese first arrived in Melaka to take control of the Indian Ocean trade that had been going on for centuries before, when Li An points out her family's history within Malaysia and contrasts it with immigrant Malays, we as the readers get a sense of the idea of 'Malaysia' as a flexible creation with porous borders. It is therefore the "Malaysia is for Malays" rhetoric, along with its brother argument that the Chinese and Indians are immigrants and therefore temporary inhabitants in Malaysia, that lacks historical precedent.

Li An's ideas are also challenged later by a Malay named Abdullah, one of Chester's roommates, who tells Chester while they are sitting with Li An that "Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water. Malays have many adat, Islam also have shariat. All teach good action. Chinese have no adat, they eat pork, they like gamble, make money."<sup>70</sup> It is a simple compare-and-contrast that places the Malay above the Chinese in a moral sense, and therefore also implies Malay righteousness in deserving continued control of Malaysia. This is later explicitly stated when Abdullah, Chester, and their other roommate Samad meet in Henry and Li An's home and Abdullah says, "The Chinese not like the government so much, but they make big mistake. It is this government that protect them . . . But why Chinese say Malay no good, government no good, want to change government?"<sup>71</sup> The impression here is that Malaysia, while considered a constitutional democracy, is not expected to be treated as such by the Malays because of their ruling position. This brings to mind Goh's argument that Malays have to be acclimatized into the rules of a true democracy, so the Chinese and the Indians shouldn't antagonize them while they learn how to let go of power. Just like that argument, this dialogue has the unfortunate sense of infantilizing the Malays as not being sufficiently enlightened enough to participate in a democracy. However, the Chinese position may very well be that according to the construction of Malays in Malaysian Chinese text.

The last thing I want to note is Li An's attempt to keep a journal from May 1st to May 12th. Li An's coverage of the news moves from derisive and uninterested—"Malaysia too tolerant for American-style violence."<sup>72</sup>—to confused—"Are the Chinese not true Malaysians? Is the problem that we are not Malays?"<sup>73</sup>—to finally disgusted after the elections on May 12th, where she finally bursts out, "All this talk about Chinese rights makes me sick too. Malay rights, Chinese rights. No one talks about Malaysian rights. I am a Malaysian. I don't exist."<sup>74</sup> Lim made the same point

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69 Ibid.

70 Ibid, 46.

71 Ibid, 55.

72 Ibid, 73.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid, 75. The discrepancy here is that Li An states that the elections happened on May 12th, when the general election for West Malaysia actually occurred on the 10th; the 11th and 12th was when the Gerakan and Opposition had their victory marches, inciting Malay anger all the while.

in her memoirs that, as the daughter of a Peranakan woman and the way she was raised to focus on English moreso than any other language, she felt less like a true Chinese and more of someone who was simply Malaysian at her core. Li An, as her narrative alter-ego, voices a similar feeling here, which could also be the same feeling as many Malaysian Chinese of Peranakan/Nyonya heritage. It gets to the heart of the communalism problem, where there are Malays and there are Chinese. However, what about those who are both, who may have had roots on the Malay Peninsula for longer than both the immigrant Chinese and immigrant Malay? Lim does not give an answer to this question, probably because it is not a question that is considered in the history of the riots. The lines are bolder there, with Malays on one side and the Chinese on the other. There is a similar feeling within the novel, as Li An's father-in-law is killed during the riots and her mother-in-law is traumatized for weeks afterward, telling Li An, "You cannot trust other people, only your own kind."<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps that is why there are no other novels written by Malaysian Chinese about the riots. There are lines drawn here, and because anything ethnicized is also politicized, a novel about the riots written by a Malaysian Chinese and published in Malaysia would draw acute criticism for dredging up racialized history. As it is, Goh notes in his own blog about comparisons made between the most recent general election in 2013 by the younger generation and why such a comparison should not be made lightly. As a subject of nonfictional history there are few sources that deal with the riots as the main topic; because literature embodies an author's viewpoints even when they do not intend it, it becomes trickier to write a fair, well-balanced novel that explores all views. Even *Joss and Gold*'s Malay characters seem two-dimensional at points, especially when they are only brought in to espouse the "Malay viewpoint" and make everyone else feel a little more uncomfortable. Li An is a reasonable character, but she is also the author's stand-in from decades later, and in that sense she becomes less of a character in this first part and more of the only reasonable person in Malaysia regarding race and politics. However, Li An is a conceptualization of what I see as regret: *why couldn't we all be like her then? Why couldn't we calm down, back in 1969?*

#### IV. Malaysian Chinese Today On The May 13 Riots

The preceding chapter revealed what is published of Malaysian Chinese writings on the May 13th riots. Although there are only a few sources in English, reading between the lines has showed that there is a good possibility of nothing being written in any Chinese dialect regarding the riots, and certainly if there is anything it is only being disseminated within a limited audience rather than being pushed out into larger spheres of influence. Reasons why this is have already been discussed, but at the heart of it this is a very personal experience and there are many Chinese who are raised with the cultural expectation that private experiences should remain so. Knowing this but still interested in gathering firsthand accounts, I opted to create an online survey to give respondents the opportunity to discuss their own feelings about the riots and how they feel about the Malaysia that has developed from May 13, 1969 to today. With the help of relatives both inside and outside of Malaysia, roughly one hundred and twenty people were contacted in regards to the survey. Nine people responded, making a response rate of about seven and a half percent.

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75 Ibid, 84.

However, the people who took the time to share their experiences of that day, their opinions on why the riots occurred, and their feelings about their place as Malaysian Chinese within the greater Malaysia society provided some intriguing information that ties back into what has been provided in this thesis thus far. It must be noted that the respondents responded to an English language survey in fluent English, which marks them as educated Chinese of the middle class or above, so the answers given do reflect certain biases based on their place in society. Also, not one person opted to allow their words to be attributed to their name in the body of this thesis, and only a couple consented to using an alias. The rest opted to be referred to by either their occupation or their gender and age, with two preferring complete anonymity.

The important points of the survey can be split into three sections: before the riots, during, and afterwards into Malaysia's present. For the questions regarding life before the riots, I wanted to get an understanding of the neighborhood demographics, how the respondents related to other ethnic groups, and how the respondents thought of that time now. A male engineer who lived in Klang into his teenage years summed up the experiences of the majority of respondents who lived in either Chinese-majority or mixed-race areas when he commented, "Generally there was harmony between the races despite some mistrust between different races."<sup>76</sup> There was a dissenting opinion from a man who had lived in a Malay-dominated area as a child. He noted that he had often heard that "all non-Malays races were immigrants," and that "non-Malays, especially the Chinese were stealing the job opportunities and marginalised the Malays as a whole, thus depriving the Malays of progress and to a large extent causing them to be poor."<sup>77</sup> However, the general feeling is that the Malaysia before the May 13 riots was more ethnically intermingled and not a hardline plural society; children went to school together and got along. And when asked about how they felt looking back on those times, a respondent called Concerned voiced the ambivalence in many of the answers to that question by stating, "Perhaps a little better pre-May 13 but not much has changed except the term positive affirmation as opposed to discrimination."<sup>78</sup> It seems this is a euphemism for many of the allowances given to Malays as the bumiputra, and that what he feels would have been called discriminatory practices before the riots were no longer allowed to be named as such—a sort of governmental or social 'muffling' was in effect after the riots.

The experience of the riots differs greatly depending on location, as respondents from Sarawak state in East Malaysia, Ayer Itam in Penang, and Klang (which is in Selangor state but some distance from Kuala Lumpur itself) commented on the lack of violence and only having to deal with the curfews imposed by the state of emergency announcement. Those in Kuala Lumpur remember having to confront the realities of the riots; a homemaker from Subang Jaya who had lived in Petaling Jaya at the time of the riots writes,

I remember my dad preparing escape routes should our house come under attack. There was stockpiling of food, something that many still practise today whenever rumours of potential crisis occur such as before the general elections. Weapons such as parang (knife), sticks and cangkul (Malaysian spade) were put within easy reach. Whistles were also prepared to warn the neighbourhood in case of attacks. The radio was switched on to hear the latest news. It was a time of great tension, even for me as a 8-year-old.<sup>79</sup>

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76 Kelly Jones, "13 May 1969 Survey - UC Berkeley Honors Thesis, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies," (Berkeley: UC Berkeley, 2013).

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

Another witnessed "both the attacks and killings of the Chinese as well as the Malays. First it was the Malays attacking and killing the Chinese and later the other way around as an act of revenge. Then during the emergency when the military took over, my mum nearly got shot."<sup>80</sup> Others stayed barricaded within their homes and only remember the tension and the rumors, such as those heard by a man who now lives in Singapore, where "people [were] being poisoned, behead[ed] and so forth[, but were] unverified."<sup>81</sup>

The riots are sometimes called the Kuala Lumpur riots because they did not spread outside of the capital city, thus labeling the riots as a sort of urban phenomenon, but in some sense it did leak out into the rest of the country via the curfews and the canceling of the East Malaysia elections. More important is how Malaysian Chinese viewed the event afterwards, no matter that they were in Penang or Johor rather than Kuala Lumpur itself. All respondents noted that it was either a critical event for Malaysian Chinese and Malaysia as a whole, or that it was an important event that still has repercussions today. Only one respondent noted feeling "mildly optimistic" that the next generation would be able to "outgrow the racial divide," but also noted that "thanks to the race[-based] politic[s], we are more polarised (sic) than ever."<sup>82</sup> But to get back to how the May 13 riots themselves are conceptualized by Malaysian Chinese, the answers to why it happened are varied, though a few either outrightly or implicitly lay the blame on politics. The homemaker from Subang Jaya seems to confront Goh in her answer when she states, "Why should it be unthinkable that there could be another political power in rule? Changing the government should be allowed as it may bring improvements overall and for everyone. Besides, that is democracy."<sup>83</sup> An academic in Kajang said she disagreed with Kua's thesis of a conspiracy theory being the reason for the riots, writing, "It was the politicians with vested interests that stirred up greater interethnic animosity. I believe that it cannot happen without some pre-meditated planning/incitement from some UMNO leaders. Nonetheless, I feel that Kua's thesis that it was a plot by Razak to get the Tunku to step down does not provide enough direct evidence."<sup>84</sup> What is evident is that there is not one way to construct the riots beyond its effect on the Malaysia of today as a traumatic event that altered the country's direction; some commented on how discriminatory policies ensured university scholarship money for Malays no matter their qualifications while the Chinese had to take loans, and most stated directly or in effect their unhappiness with the governmental policies.

It must be said that the kind of people willing to answer a survey on the May 13 riots would have very strong opinions against the Malaysian government, but I don't think it necessarily devalues the information gathered. What these answers show, above all, is that there is no one construction of the riots in the perspective of Malaysian Chinese; there is confusion, there is suspicion, and there is a longing to know why it happened, just as there is the inclination to discuss the aftermath of the riots as a true separation of 'them' versus 'us' in which the Malays gained more than the Chinese. One respondent used the word "apartheid" to describe the separatist conditions, but in true apartheid countries the ruling ethnic group rules absolutely, while in Malaysia there are still many wealthy Chinese and politicians and doctors who use Malay titles of honor as part of their own conceptualization. Another respondent commented that both sides were at fault and need to take responsibility, but many of the respondents were not even ten years of age at the time of the riots. Perhaps the confusion of a definite way to construct the riots lies,

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80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

in part, in the fact that there are too many easy answers—politics, communalism, jealousy—and no one truth, not anymore, not ever.

## V. Conclusion

The May 13 riots were critical; no one can deny that. More important than the event, however, is how it has haunted Malaysian politics for over forty years. It has become integrated with all Malaysian general elections, including the last one in May of 2013. It splinters the original meaning of the riots and infuses it with a particular kind of menace that goes beyond its moment in 1969. That was why I chose only to interrogate it in the context of its conception only, not of what came after with the National Economic Policy or Dr. Mahathir bin Mohammed's reign as Prime Minister in the 1980s. I wanted to understand how Malaysian Chinese constructed the riots as a particular moment in their shared past and see how they had taken back the event for themselves. Instead, I found a mess of complications. That makes it more interesting because there never really is a single truth but only the perception of it. However, in this case I also can't help but conclude that there was no way that the Malaysian Chinese were allowed to take back the riots for themselves; it was instead constructed by the Malay majority in a certain way as the official truth and the Chinese have not been able to own their own experiences of the riots ever since.

I brought up the current Malaysia in the third chapter because there was no way to escape discussing the riots with Malaysian Chinese while ignoring today's Malaysia. As Goh states in his blog, the new generation of voters have become very interested in the riots because they had never lived through them and are instead questioning why they should be afraid of a reoccurrence of the riots. Kua's book came out in 2007 presumably because there was an interest in what could be said about the riots, what truths can be picked up from declassified diplomatic wires and journalists' notes. There are novels written about the riots, and with time there may be more from Malaysian Chinese authors just as there have been from Malaysian Indian authors. There is more happening in the last twenty years regarding the riots, and as Malaysia continues to struggle over the idea of another party, another ethnicity controlling the government for the first time in its history as an independent nation, there will be more to come. This thesis should then be considered more of a work in progress as things continue to work their way through in Malaysia and more truths continue to float to the top. After all, the construction of a single event never really ends so long as there are people still interested in understanding it for themselves.

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