

## ***Introduction***

*Long Long Time Ago 1* (2016) is a contemporary film depicting Singapore from 1965 to the early 1970s. This oversees a period when Singapore was trying to develop itself as a fledgling state, following separation from Malaysia. The film not only captures everyday life in the *kampong*, but also documents major events that occurred during those tumultuous years. Film Director, Jack Neo, emphasized foremost on authenticity in portraying the past.<sup>1</sup> While heavy usage of dialects in local productions are typically prohibited by the IMDA<sup>2</sup>, Neo went the extra mile to request for an exemption to recreate the past as accurately as possible. Neo's efforts extend to the story set, where props and backdrops were painstakingly crafted to replicate scenes from the past. This evokes feelings of nostalgia from viewers who have experienced this bygone era, who can once again relive familiar memories. Several themes and ideas are intricately woven into the plot, which I will touch upon in this essay.

## ***Gender Discrimination***

From the get-go, the film depicts society as patriarchal in nature. Zhao Di, the female protagonist, represents women in an era where female voices and autonomy were subdued, and had to struggle to make the best out of life for herself amidst countless trials. This starkly contrasts Ah Kun, her spoiled elder brother, who is favoured despite his lazy ways and lack of contribution to the household. Surprisingly, the practice of gender discrimination may very well be perpetuated by women themselves, who silently accept and impose notions of patriarchy on other females around them, such as Zhao Di upon her daughters. This is captured in gripping scenes, such as when her daughters inquired about civil servants and Zhao Di replied: "We are women. This is a job for the men. Women only need to bear children."

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<sup>1</sup> Neo. In *Interview (Part 1) with Power 98FM on Long Long Time Ago 1*. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA). *BOARD OF FILM CENSORS CLASSIFICATION GUIDELINES*. Singapore, n.d.

### ***National Identity and Security***

Following Singapore and Malaysia's separation, efforts were made by the state to implement policies that will shape a clear identity for the people. Registration for Identity Cards (ICs) for all Singaporeans was symbolic in creating a Singaporean identity back then, as strong national identity and pride were still not widely ingrained, and individual considerations triumphed that of a collective identity. This is demonstrated by how Osman's wife, Fatimah, was hesitant on settling in Singapore and suggested resettling in Malaysia instead, where they could enjoy privileges as the majority race. Possession of a Singaporean IC clearly denotes one's status as a Singaporean, and this helps to instil a sense of togetherness in what was essentially vastly diverse communities. The conscription act passed in 1967 further cements Singapore's status as an independent nation, whose citizens have a shared duty to protect their country.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Racial Identity and Tensions***

However, through the 1969 racial tensions, we observe how fragile Singapore's social dynamics can actually be. Unrest based on racial fault lines can easily be fanned by gossip and fearmongering. In the film, Ah Kun was the main culprit for inciting racial unrest, which thereafter spread across entire *kampong* villages. The film is reflective of government efforts in quelling the unrest and promoting racial harmony<sup>4</sup>, culminating in the apprehension of Ah Kun.

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<sup>3</sup> Kartini Saparudin. "National Service: Early Years." *Singapore Infopedia*, August 22, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2019. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_692\\_2005-02-01.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_692_2005-02-01.html).

<sup>4</sup> David W. Chang. In *Nation-Building in Singapore*, 8:761–73. Singapore: University of California Press, 1968.

### ***Language and Dialects***

The blend of languages in the film is refreshing, with language being portrayed as both an inclusive and divisive force. Without a common language, people conversed in all manners of dialect and languages. This can be positive as we see different races learning each other's languages, fostering a sense of respect and acceptance for different backgrounds. However, language can also become an alienating force, as misunderstandings arise due to language barriers. This is exemplified by the racial conflict scene: when the Malay villagers said they have to pass by Chinese villages to "chop coconuts", the statement was misconstrued and interpreted as "chopping heads" by fourth uncle, who became even more apprehensive of the Malays.

### ***Conclusion***

Ultimately, the film ends on a positive note, with harmony symbolically preserved among all races as Ah Kun and Osman make up and demonstrate the camaraderie so embodied in the "*Kampong Spirit*".<sup>5</sup> The film is generally well received by the locals, who acknowledge how the film successfully captured the essence of past Singapore, evoking feelings of nostalgia. Overall, the film contributes to shape and preserve Singapore's social memory,<sup>6</sup> as older generations reminisce, and younger generations gain a deeper understanding about the tribulations our forefathers faced to develop Singapore into what it is today.

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<sup>5</sup> Chia, Josephine. *Kampong Spirit - Gotong Royong: Life in Potong Pasir, 1955 to 1965*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Khoo, Gaik Cheng. *Of Diminishing Memories and Old Places: Singaporean Films and the Work of Archiving Landscape*. 2013.

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