

# Man of mystery in the spotlight

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A Singapore film that focuses on one of the most enigmatic figures in the Communist Party of Malaya turns to Hong Kong actor Tony Leung to help tell the story.

CHIN Peng might be the face of Malayan Communism but it's his little-known predecessor Lai Teck - a controversial, shadowy character who turned out to be a triple agent - that sparked the imagination of artist Ho Tzu Nyen.

Ho - whose work revolves around Singapore's history - based his latest art film on the man believed to have been instrumental in steering the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) away from an armed takeover of Malaya.

"There's still not much known about Lai Teck, and I based my knowledge on historical writings and scholarship about him. I thought he was an interesting figure because the CPM provided the key resistance during the Japanese Occupation," explains Ho, 40, who works primarily in film, video and performance.

Lai Teck, who died in 1957, is believed to have served the French as a spy in Indo-China and was allegedly recruited by the British and brought to Singapore to infiltrate the CPM. He was the secretary-general of the CPM from 1939 to 1947, apparently using the British to pick off his rivals within the party.

It is postulated that because of this, he steered the CPM on a non-confrontational course with the British, and in cooperation with the US and Western European powers against Germany and Japan.

When the Japanese occupied Singapore, Lai Teck managed to escape execution. Japanese evidence would later show that he promised to be a Japanese agent.

The fact that Lai Teck (even his real name is disputed) is an enigma who's crucial to Malaysian and Singapore history made him a central figure in Ho's script, he says. What the artist did is to splice up Hong Kong actor Tony Leung's movies made over a period of 24 years and re-piece them together to create *The Nameless*.

The 21-minute film will be shown as a video installation at Art Basel Unlimited in Basel, Switzerland, next week, presented by the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI). The Unlimited is a high-profile section of the six-day art fair dedicated to projects bound for museum and institutional collections, given their monumental scale and proportions.

Introduced in 2000, the Unlimited showcases video projections, installations and live performances, among other projects, and draws international visitors, including renowned curators, collectors and art critics.

Out of a record of more than 200 submissions from around the world this year, only 88 were shortlisted. Ho's work is the only other film to be presented in the Unlimited this year.

Explaining his method, Ho says that he picked Tony Leung because he is one of the greatest Chinese actors (in this generation), adding that the use of sampling in experimental films has a long tradition in contemporary art.

"What I've done is to re-contextualise the clips so that the images tell the story. For fans of Leung's work, seeing the clips would also trigger memories of his films so it is a reference to the notion of remembrance," he says.

Hong Kong cinema also has a tradition of being fascinated with "compromised" individuals, as evident from the constant stream of Hong Kong films about "stool pigeons", double agents, informers and traitors.

Leung's 16 films used in this work include *City of Sadness* (1989), *Chungking Express* (1994), *The Longest Nite* (1998), *Lust, Caution* (2007) and *The Grandmaster* (2013).

Ho points out that even people who aren't familiar with Leung's films will get the notion that the scenes are taken from other contexts. "And that's the way we need to think of history - that it's a story of missing information or contexts, that much more is going on than what is written. We're never sure if the story is accurate."

In that sense, the film parallels what we know of Lai Teck's life - only bits and pieces.

*The Nameless* was made in 2014 and has shown at the Shanghai Biennale and in Tokyo, Osaka and Berlin. It was also screened at the Singapore International Film Festival last year.

The difference is that as a video installation, Ho will project two versions on each side of the screen simultaneously. One will be voiced over in Chinese and the other in Vietnamese - a nod to the fact that Lai Teck was a Sino-Vietnamese.

Ho studied Creative Arts at the University of Melbourne and has a Masters of Arts in South-east Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore. He works with moving images because he's more concerned about the limitations of storytelling. "We try to be more reflective and critical than filmmaking," he says.

One of Ho's first works is Utama- Every Name in History is I (2003), which consists of a video and 20 portrait paintings of the 14th-century figure Sang Nila Utama, who discovered Singapore. In 2006, he completed Sejarah Singapura, a commission for the National Museum of Singapore that features an immersive, panoramic audiovisual representation of pre-colonial Singapore.

STPI director Emi Eu says she first saw The Nameless in the Osaka Museum of Art, and found that it's not only a homage to Tony Leung and Hong Kong movie history but also a story which has strong resonance to world history in South-east Asia and the West, with its links to World War II and the Cold War.

"Every time we participate in a global art fair, I always push for opportunities to present Singapore artists in other forums possible. This is a way to build up the reputation and branding of Singapore artists globally," she adds.

At the main fair, as the only Singapore gallery, STPI is presenting Sam Durant (US), Carsten Höller (Belgium), Shirazeh Houshiary (UK), Jane Lee (Singapore), Rirkrit Tiravanija (Thailand) and Haegue Yang (South Korea).

- **STPI's booth at Art Basel 2016 is E2, and Ho Tzu Nyen's "The Nameless" will be held at Booth U9, Art Basel Unlimited Hall, Basel, Switzerland, from June 14-19**

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