

Film review: '1987: Untracing the Conspiracy' by Jason Soo and ex-political detainees



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16 held last week involved in conspiracy to overthrow the Govt, says ministry

Marxist plot uncovered

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BG Lee defines parameters for foreign journals circulating here

They must not take sides on domestic political issues, he tells congress of newspaper publishers

By BOB NG of Staff

everybody would support the Singapore Government's action, the minister's arguments will generate a greater understanding for its position.

Other speakers at the session made points which showed that, at least with regard to the issue of newspaper errors and the right of reply, the attitude of the Western media is similar to that of the Singapore Government.

In his speech, BG Lee, who is also Second Minister of Defence, took pains to explain why Singapore is so concerned about foreign press involvement in domestic politics.

Using past and recent examples to back his contention, he said the Government has seen how the media can bring in undesirable values, how newspapers can be used to carry out covert subversion, and how inflammatory reporting can lead to racial riots.

He said the Government supports a policy of a free flow of objective information from the rest of the world because such information is vital for business in the modern economy of a global city-state such as Singapore.

HEI-SINKI — The Trade and Industry Minister, Brig-Gen (Reserve) Lee Haien Loong, yesterday drew the line between what foreign publications with significant sales in Singapore can and cannot do in their reporting on the Republic.

What is not in their ranking sides on domestic political issues, he said about 300 newspaper publishers here in a major speech defining the parameters within which such foreign publications should operate in Singapore.

If they do not keep out of the political arena, he said, the Government will take steps to curb them. Foreign correspondents are free to report about Singapore in any way they choose — so long as they do so accurately and to their foreign readers.

He Lee said the Government does not care about their ideological biases or political slants. Which is why it allows 34 accredited journalists from 40 foreign news organisations, including Communist ones, to operate in Singapore.

It is when foreign journals with significant circulations in the Republic start to report on Singapore for a Singaporean audience that the Government has to take care, he said.

"We do not want such foreign journals to take sides in domestic political issues, whether to increase their circulation in Singapore or to campaign for a particular outcome they prefer," he said.

Wah Piow, the mastermind



Tan ... plans to return in 10 to 15 years' time when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is "no longer around". — ST picture taken in Singapore in 1974.

THE Home Affairs Ministry yesterday named Tan Wah Piow, 35, as the mastermind of the conspiracy

arrested sought to manipulate organisations and instigate members from behind the scenes, using students and religious bodies as a cover for their subversive activities.

Cheng and his activists kept out of the limelight, hid their ideological inclinations from other members of the organisations they infiltrated, and held themselves out as dedicated social workers fighting against alleged injustices and oppression.

The strategy to use religious organisations was inspired by the involvement of the Church in the political struggle in the Philippines, where Cheng had learned about "liberation theology".

According to this brand of radical theology, which originated in Latin America, the Church must intervene to bring about social and political change.

In small groups, during what were ostensibly Bible-study sessions, Cheng and his supporters spread Marxist-Communist ideas.

They also expressed their views and analyses on socio-economic issues in a number of Catholic publications, including the Church's fortnightly tabloid, The Catholic News.

At the People's Action Party biennial

porary militant leftists in the West. "They augment traditional CP/M tactics with new techniques and methods, using the Catholic Church and religious organisations.

"This marks a new phase in the unceasing communist efforts to subvert the existing system of government and to seize power in Singapore."

In an ironic twist to Singapore's bilingual education policy, the statement said younger Singaporeans who were disaffected, disgruntled and misled

QUOTE
The new hybrid pro-communists

Singapore now has to contend with new hybrid pro-communist types who draw their ideological inspiration not only from Maoism and Marxism-Leninism, but also from the ideas of contemporary militant leftists in the West.

They augment traditional CP/M (Communist Party of Malaya) tactics with new techniques and methods, using the Catholic Church and religious organisations. This marks a new phase in the unceasing communist efforts to subvert the existing system of government and to seize power in Singapore.

— Home Affairs Ministry statement

THE Home Affairs Ministry announced yesterday that it has uncovered a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the Government and establish a communist state.

It named the mastermind as Tan Wah Piow, a 35-year-old Marxist and former student agitator who fled Singapore in 1976 to evade national service and is now in Britain.

The 16 people arrested under the Internal Security Act last week — including lawyers, university and polytechnic graduates and Roman Catholic Church workers — were part of his scheme, the ministry said in a statement.

Tan's plan was to set up a network of followers to prepare for his eventual return, after Mr Lee Kuan Yew was no longer Prime Minister, when he would establish a Marxist state here.

Targets of infiltration

His key helper in Singapore was Vincent Cheng, 40, an active volunteer church worker who once studied to be a priest.

He had found the trade unions impossible to penetrate, the statement said, and so concentrated his efforts on two main areas: church groups and students, especially those at the Singapore Polytechnic.

Tan's people also infiltrated the Workers' Party — four of those arrested have WP links — because he thought it worthwhile to influence an opposition party.

Four years ago, Tan and Cheng established a "front" body, the "Third

In 1987: Untracing the Conspiracy (the 54-minute version, rated R21), director Jason Soo splices two different kinds of scenes: group interviews with the ex-detainees who agreed to be in the film, and archival footage regarding the mass arrests. These scenes are occasionally punctuated by contextualisations in the form of intertitles, at times devastating/necessary and at times a little on-the-nose (e.g. telling you what to pay attention to or what to feel instead of letting audiences draw their own conclusions). This formula seems simple, and it is, but it is also effective.

As the ex-detainees retell their experiences in state detention without trial, the camera's frame focuses not merely on their 'talking heads', but on their whole upper body. As such, every gesture can be appreciated. This is important because oral history interviews such as these are not merely

verbal recountings of ‘what happened’, but a bodily materialisation of experiences as *lived*.

Vincent Cheng repeatedly whips his forearm across the frame; Chew Kheng Chuan rises slightly in his seat, pumps his arms as if he were running in place, and slashes his palm across an imaginary face; and Low Yit Leng maps the interrogation room with her fingers. These performative re-enactments evocatively tell the audience what they have been through more effectively than any verbal description. This is one of the main reasons why this film plays a role in educating the public about Operation Spectrum in a way that books, websites or articles sometimes can’t.

Many of these accounts are heartbreaking, but the overall tone of the film isn’t. As I see it, the purpose of this film is not to tug at heartstrings or generate sympathy for the former detainees. Jason Soo dedicates a significant portion of the film to an extended scene where Chew Kheng Chuan *jovially* retells and performs the horrifying night of his arrest to the others in the interview. For instance, he describes leisurely taking a shower and putting on a suit and tie while the police were banging on his door just so that when they took his mug shot, he wouldn’t look as “deranged” – his word – as his fellow detainees. This is a powerful performance. As these detainees laugh together, they subvert narratives of victimhood. They show exactly how ridiculous the situation was both then and now, and indeed redress the power imbalance between them and their detainers, which Soo has indicated is one of the aims of this film.

After the film screening, we had some time to ask Soo and Vincent Cheng some questions. Cheng is an ex-detainee who became branded as the main ‘Marxist conspirator’ based in Singapore by the government and was coerced to confess on prime-time television his ‘intention’ to cause rioting and bloodshed. One of the pieces of evidence the Internal Security Department claimed to prove this intention was the fact that Cheng, as a Catholic social worker at the time, conducted a seminar about poverty in Singapore.

Cheng is understandably angry at the fact that the Internal Security Act is still very much intact in Singapore, having spent more than three years in detention (most of the time in solitary confinement) without trial. [Amnesty International had recognised him as a ‘prisoner of conscience’](#). That said, his bearing is remarkably serene. During the Q&A, we learned that in order to stay sane in prison, he memorised a book on foot reflexology by heart and performed massages on himself. After his release, his freedom was curtailed for another five years; he was essentially under house arrest and could not fraternise with his fellow detainees or his churchmates, much less talk to the press about ‘what really happened’.

Admittedly, answers to questions like ‘what really happened’, and the concept of historical ‘fact’ or ‘truth’, are complex. But that is precisely what many Singaporeans need to understand: that one should critically engage with history instead of accepting the current narrative as definitive. Many would agree that Singapore’s apathy towards this kind of engagement is a product of deliberate strategy and policy-making and not ‘natural ignorance’. In the media, for instance, The

Straits Times [published a statement](#) after Lee Kuan Yew's death in 2015 from Archbishop William Goh about how revisiting Operation Spectrum holds no purpose for nation-building and that it was time to "move on". The makers of *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy* obviously disagree. Giving voice to these detainees does not entail mayhem or social anomie, but is one way Singapore becomes a more historically aware and mature nation moving forward.

Indeed one could say that Operation Spectrum is one of the main reasons why Singapore, as a nation, is so politically disinclined. After the crackdown, Singapore lost a whole generation of social and civic activism, which is only slowly starting to emerge again thanks to social media. While this 54-minute version of the film itself did not formally put forth a historical thesis or argument about Operation Spectrum (rather it focused on the ex-detainee's personal experiences), my understanding is that a future version of the film will cover the issue more extensively as well as highlight the historical repercussions of this event with the benefit of hindsight.

When Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore With Love* (a documentary and oral history about Singapore's political exiles) was banned from distribution or screening in Singapore, there was a public outcry – at least on Facebook. *Let us be the judge*, the comments lamented. *Let us be the judge of whether this narrative is or isn't historically sound*. By banning it altogether, the Media Development Authority took away that opportunity for Singaporeans to engage with and critique such narratives vis-à-vis The Singapore Story. My hope is that Singaporeans will be able to have this opportunity with *1987: Untracing the Conspiracy* when the full-length version is released.

Note: This post was edited to reflect that the restricted conditions Cheng experienced after his release from prison was not over a span of three additional years but five.