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ArtReview Asia
"Ho Tzu Nyen: The Myth of Sisyphus"

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Ho Tzu Nyen

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The Myth of Sisyphus

by Mark Rappolt

A quick look at a still from Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Nameless* (2015) will tell you that its subject is one of Hong Kong's most celebrated actors, Tony Leung Chiu-wai. Indeed, Ho's film includes extracts from the greater part of the actor's distinguished cinematic career, from *A City of Sadness* (1988) to *The Grandmaster* (2015). Along the way we witness various young or middle-aged Leungs thinking, walking, counting, listening, whispering and doing a little stabbing and a lot of smoking. But listen to the voiceover or read the subtitles of Ho's tribute and it's clear that the 'real' subject of his film is Lai Teck, Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party from 1939 to 1947. Although it turns out that this Vietnamese (purportedly half ethnic-Chinese) was also known as Loi Tak, Lai Te, Lai Rac and around 47 other variants (many being the result of Chinese or other transliterations of Lai Teck's codename within the Party: Wright). Lai Teck's birth name may have been Truong Phuoc Dat. Unless it was Hoang A Nhac. No one is particularly certain about how and when he died. But he might have been suffocated in 1947 by a party death-squad while hiding in Thailand.

Ho Tzu Nyen is a Singaporean artist who works mainly in film, video installation and performance. He represented his country at the 2011 Venice Biennale, for which he created the multichannel video installation *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), a fusing of fourteenth-century European mysticism with contemporary Singapore, and the art-historical, philosophical and musical history of clouds. He writes, too: his 2004 essay 'Perpetual Beginnings – Strands of Processes in Painting', for example, is included in *Histories, Practices, Interventions: A Reader in Contemporary Singaporean Art* (2016), reviewed in the books section of this issue.

Back in *The Nameless*, as the narrative talks about the forming of the Central Committee of the Malayan Communist Party, we see a group shot of grandmasters (among them Leung) from *The Grandmaster*. When Ho's narrative speaks of "secret knowledge and the holy motors of history", we see Leung performing tricks onstage in *The Great Magician* (2011). I watched the first of those films on an airplane recently. Depending on which ones you have watched, parts of those other narratives will also be very present.

Having joined the Communist Party at a young age, Lai Tek went on to become an agent for the French, then the British, who helped him

get to Singapore and ascend the ranks of the Malay Communist Party (by arresting his rivals). When the Japanese occupied Singapore during the Second World War, he worked for them. In Ho's narrative Lai Teck is estimated to have been responsible for the arrest and execution of more than a hundred of his comrades. In 1947 a Central Committee meeting was convened in order to challenge the party leader about his reported activities for other parties. He failed to attend and absconded with the party funds. For most of his life Lai Teck was a double, triple and possibly quadruple agent. Leung plays an undercover agent (a policeman infiltrating the triad) in *Infernal Affairs* (2002) and special agent (working for the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War) in *Lust, Caution* (2007). Espionage has been a feature of his roles. This was coincidence until Ho made *The Nameless*, in which, additionally, Leung's various screen roles seem a match for Lai Teck's various names. If we're hearing about Lai Teck not really being Lai Teck, we're watching Tony Leung not really being Tony Leung.

Yet neither Tony Leung nor Lai Teck lies at the true heart of *The Nameless*. Rather, as is the case in much of Ho's output as an artist, it is the construction of identity and the related fabrication of history (and within that, art history – both Western and Eastern). Many of Ho's works relate to his ongoing *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (begun during a 2014 residency at the Asia Art Archive), which explores the fact, fiction, various indigenous and colonial intrigues and ideologies that comprise the modern historical narrative of the subregion. G is for Gene Z. Hanrahan; L is for Lai Teck; T is for Tiger; W is for Weretiger. Many of these entries attempt to trace a series of faceless, nameless shapeshifters – of the kind explored in *2 or 3 Tigers* (2015), which you'll have read about in the previous article – that stand for the identity of Southeast Asia, and perhaps the era of globalisation as a whole. It sounds like a Sisyphean task. But as Albert Camus once said: 'If the world were clear, art would not exist.' ara

The Nameless will be screened as part of this year's Art Basel Hong Kong Film programme, Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, 23–25 March; The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia, Vol 1: G for Ghost(writers) is on show at A Space, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 21 March – 9 August



The Nameless, synchronized double channel HD projections, double 5.1 systems, 21 min 51 sec, 2015