

DO BE MALAY(SIAN): 8TV'S FANTASY AND THE MALAY OTHER

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Published online: 28 September 2018

To cite this article: Luqman Lee. 2018. Do be Malay(sian): 8TV's fantasy and the Malay other. *Kajian Malaysia* 36(2): 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.2.2>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2018.36.2.2>

ABSTRACT

In August 2011, Malaysian television station 8TV's three Ramadan public service announcements (PSA) garnered shocked responses from Malaysian Chinese viewers nationwide for their presumably ethno-condescending overtones. What may on the surface appear to be an issue of simple oversight by the broadcaster reveals upon closer examination to be indicative of two realities – the hierarchised interfaith and interethnic normative, and the increasing vocality of minority groups who seek to reconfigure this normativity. I posit that both realities are directly and tangentially productive of the very same racial-racist beliefs that were challenged. There are two facets to our inquiry – the purportedly "non-racist" intent of 8TV, and the racial lens through which the content was decoded. This paper discusses the paradox of Malaysian racial discourse through Žižek's transposition of Lacan's fantasy to the socio-political domain as ideological fantasy writ large on screen, where by alleging that 8TV's intent was racist, viewers were in fact identifying the gap between the symbolic discourse of Malay supremacy and its material realities. Moreover, by identifying with or alleging that 8TV's intent was racially-biased, it is argued that the viewers were necessarily racialist.

Keywords: Malay identity, 8TV, Ramadan PSA, Žižek, Lacan, Malaysian television

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian television station 8TV's three *Ramadan* (Muslim month of fasting) public service announcements (PSA) in early August of 2011 jolted a majority of Malaysian Chinese (hereafter referred to as Chinese) viewers out of their collective seats in shock. Presumably, the PSAs were meant to encourage non-Muslim viewers to adopt respectful attitudes and behaviour towards the majority Malaysian Malay

(hereafter referred to as Malay) population who were fasting at the time. However, 8TV's choice of a Chinese protagonist acting "disrespectfully" towards Malays, and the significance of the PSAs' airing on a channel that narrowcasts specifically to a primarily Chinese demographic, were not lost on viewers. While 8TV eventually apologised, their initial official public response was unapologetically flippant and was regarded by many as offensive.

Given 8TV's association with the governing coalition's dominant political party, two realities are revealed by the PSAs – the hierarchised interfaith and interethnic normative, and the increasing vocality of minority groups who seek to reconfigure this normativity. It is argued here that both realities are directly and tangentially premised on the very same essentialist beliefs about race that were projected on screen by 8TV – the respective racialised imaginations of Malaysian nationalism made manifest. I suggest that this short conflagration raises several interrelated questions that focus primarily on two broad areas. The first area is that of "intent" which may explain the conditions that gave rise to the PSAs while the second area of "content" addresses that which was encoded in the text that allowed for a racialised decoding.

My inquiry on "intent" is facilitated by an overview of the immense political pressures governing 8TV's operations while an understanding of "content" will be gained through my close reading of the three PSAs to ascertain its semiotic-signification chain. In analysing the signification chain, I employ Slavoj Žižek's transposition of Jacques Lacan's fantasy to the socio-political domain as ideological fantasy to frame the PSAs as projections of Malay fantasy writ large on screen. Furthermore, while Chinese viewers succeeded in eliciting an apology, I contend that the racial lens employed in decoding the PSAs reproduced the same essentialist fields about race that they sought to dismantle.

While some may consider these PSAs as dated, I argue that they are important not least because they do not merely reflect the historical, but also the prevailing ethnic, religious, and socio-political dynamics in Malaysia. The tendency of Media Prima Berhad (MPB), 8TV's parent company, towards cultural and/or religious insensitivity is not limited to these PSAs. In the previous year (2010), a *Hari Raya* (Malaysian Eid celebration) commercial by MPB's TV3 became controversial for allegedly featuring Christmas aesthetics (e.g. flying rickshaw reminiscent of Santa's sleigh). However, it will become clear in our discussion that 8TV's *Ramadan* PSAs do not merely contain elements that are culturally, religiously, or ethnically insensitive. The PSAs are, in fact, explicitly chauvinist. This represents a marked departure from MPB's comparatively subtler on-screen reproductions of race relations. I have written elsewhere about the sharp change in attitudes towards race relations in 2011 (Lee, 2017), and how this change was reflected in the increased frequency of explicit racial typecasting in, at least, some of MPB's more popular productions. Moreover, there were arguably no MPB

commercials/PSAs after 2011 that courted the same degree of controversy. For these reasons at least, the 2011 PSAs warrant a closer reading.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of the PSAs in question. The proceeding section reviews the political economy of the Malaysian broadcast milieu within the context of the nation's socio-political and religio-ethnic realities. The subsequent section analyses the PSAs through a Žižek-Lacanian lens to organise our understanding of their floating signifiers under the master-sign of autochthonous "Malay Malaysia". The racialist viewing of the Chinese will be examined before I conclude with a discussion of the double-edged racial-racist binary sustained by the same essentialist beliefs about race and religion.

THE QUESTION OF INTENT

At the centre of 8TV's three PSAs is presumably the colonial Chinese stereotype.¹ Scholars have long asserted that, post-independence, this stereotype is one that has historically been perpetuated by the dominant pro-Malay party of the governing coalition, United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)² (Syed Hussein, 2006; Khoo, 2006). By understanding the dynamics between Malaysia's ethnically and religiously diverse citizenry, the resulting religion-cultural identities, and their relationship with broadcasting, we will be able gain some insights into UMNO's influence on 8TV and consequently, the PSAs.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nation consisting of primarily of three main ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The notion of an ossified state of Malay-Chinese bicultural relationship is however, not new. Several scholars of post-independence Malaysia are of the opinion that the tense relations between the Chinese and Malays are a consequence of constructed differences encouraged by the British colonial administration at the time (Syed Hussein, 2006: 166–169; Khoo, 2006: 85; Reid, 2006: 14–18; Shamsul, 1996: 17–19; 2006: 136; Shamsul and Athi, 2015: 271–273; Vickers, 2006: 26–29). Many view the race riots of 1969 as a culmination of these constructed differences (Case, 2015: 40–42; Khoo, 2006: 65; 86; Rosya, 2011: 32; Shamsul and Athi, 2015: 273–275). Helen Ting in particular, proposes that the 1969 racial riots is one of two events (the other being the Islamisation policies of the 1980s) that are key to the development of national identity in contemporary Malaysia (2009: 33–34).

The May 13, 1969 racial riots between the Malays and Chinese can be attributed to the existence of several deep-rooted differences. Foo Tee-Tuan notes that Malay special privileges instead of a meritocracy-based policy system was one contention (2004: 82–83). Shamsul A. B. observes that the Malays viewed the Chinese as exploitative and instrumental to Malay economic recession by virtue of Chinese monopoly on the banking industry and the country's economy

(1996: 27). Anthony Reid observes there was the pervasiveness of the colonial Chinese stereotype of "inherently dedicated to making money by any means possible" (2006: 14–15) that underscored these dissatisfactions. Ting noted that these served to heighten Malay communal consciousness against the non-Malays for their "ungratefulness", for not "knowing their place" and not knowing how to "give-and-take" (2009: 37).³ The resultant riots lasted for a week, and were key to validating two consequent hegemonic national policies that were implemented in 1971; the New Economic Policy (NEP),⁴ and the National Culture Policy (NCP)⁵ (Hooker, 2006: 150; Khoo, 2006: 85; Marzuki, 2008: 28; Ting, 2009: 31).

With the NCP in 1971, the outcome to the contestations of Malaysian identity clarified with the nationalisation of Malay culture. On the economic front, the NEP sought to redress Malay economic position through an increase in public expenditure on special Malay programmes. Consequently, an ethnicised dimension was structured into public life, from university admissions to business licenses and home mortgages (Halim, 2000: 139; Shamsul, 1996: 28; Ting, 2009: 82; Williamson, 2002: 407). This naturalised ethnic preferential treatment entrenched the notion of Malay "special position" as a birthright among its beneficiaries (Gomez, 2008: 6; Rosya, 2011: 33; Ting, 2009: 38). This key stage within the nation as represented by the dual policies of 1971, is described by Shamsul to be the transformation from "Malay dominance" to "Malay hegemony" (1996: 29).

Subsequent developments within the Malay sphere itself have resulted in other articulations of Malayness; "Other Malays" (Kahn, 2006), "New Malays" (Foo, 2004; Halim, 2000; Khoo, 2006), and/or "hybrid Malays" (Kahn, 2006; Khoo, 2006). One response has been a heightening of national Islamisation efforts (e.g. legislation) that are increasingly encompassing of all Malaysians regardless of their religious beliefs (Gomez, 2008; Hussin, 1990; 1993; Liow and Afif, 2015; Ting, 2009). Timothy Daniels observes succinctly, that Islamic proselytisers – Muslim nongovernmental organisations, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS, *Parti Islam SeMalaysia*), and the UMNO-led government – have all exerted a major influence in the public sphere (2013:105).

These political and religious developments provide a vignette into Malaysia's inter-ethnic relations that have, for decades, progressively declined under the weight of religious conservatism and the reinvigoration of divisive strategies⁶ from UMNO and its supporters.⁷ In spite of the constitutional provisions guaranteeing secular rights alongside Malay and indigenous rights, UMNO's self-styled role as the paternalistic Malay protector is often anchored by a successful repression of non-Malay rights (Gomez, 2008: 6–7; Khoo, 2006: 13; Kua, 1990: 230; Milne and Mauzy, 1978: 370; Ting, 2009: 33–34, 38–39). Their promise for the preservation of Malay rights, identity, and position translates to a guarantee for continued communal privileges accorded in the Federal Constitution, the reaffirmation of Malay identity, and the right to further the Malay cause.

The exteriorising of non-Malays is a central tenet to this ethnocentric narrative, where the Chinese "other" has long been constructed as being exploitative (Shamsul, 1996: 27), intent on making money at all cost (Reid, 2006: 14–15), ungrateful, and "not knowing their place" (Ting, 2009: 37).⁸ These are affective triggers designed to strengthen UMNO's argument of protecting Malay primacy. In spite of these measures policing political or religious discourses, they are regarded as inadequate in exerting dominance over multiple competing trajectories that have emerged.⁹ The *Barisan Nasional*¹⁰ (BN) government has in the past five decades used its available resources – including its influence on media – to ensure a continuous domination of the nation's cultural and political discursive terrain (Foo, 2004: 26; Gomez and Jomo, 1999: 91; Zaharom and Mustafa, 2000: 159–165). Consequently, Malaysia's news agencies and television are steered by proxy owners who are closely linked to the political parties of the ruling coalition (Foo, 2004; Md Sidin and Amira, 2010; Wang, 2010).

Television stations TV1 and TV2 for example, are operated by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) and are part of the Ministry of Information. Four of the five¹¹ Malay, English, Chinese, and Indian-language commercial free-to-air (FTA) stations are fully owned by UMNO's media investment group Media Prima Berhad (MPB)¹² (Media Prima Berhad, 2015: 49; Wang, 2010: 23). In addition to television stations, MPB also owns three radio stations, as well as a 98% equity interest in The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) (NSTP) Berhad¹³ (Media Prima Berhad, 2015: 49).

As of May 2016, MPB's senior management includes both the group managing editor and the chief executive officer of NSTP (Media Prima Berhad, 2015: 84–85), while MPB's Chief Executive Officer was formerly the Head of Communications at the Prime Minister's Department from 2003 till 2009 (Media Prima Berhad, 2015: 83). The inclusion of NSTP members and former political associates within MPB's corporate structure is a recurring cross-ownership strategy that augments UMNO's control laterally across the party's media assets.

Including state-run TV1, TV2, and TV Al-Hijrah, the monopoly of Malaysia's commercial mass media landscape by Media Prima in effect, places all terrestrial or FTA channels under direct and indirect control of the government, and specifically UMNO. State control over media and specifically television, is further enhanced by Malaysia's broadcasting legal framework.¹⁴ One clear articulation of state intervention can, for instance, be observed in the case of National Film Development Corporation's¹⁵ chairman, Mohd Khusairi Abdul Talib, who is also BN's state assemblyman for Slim River in the state of Perak (Barisan Nasional, 2017; National Film Development Corporation Malaysia [FINAS], 2016). He is also the Perak UMNO Information Chief (Khairul, 2017) and is on the board of directors for the government-funded, Malay palm and rubber agricultural cultivators' Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA)¹⁶ (Lembaga Kemajuan Tanah Persekutuan, 2014).

The complex broadcast legal framework and socio-political top-down structure for control are further augmented by MPB's narrowcasting. Channel offerings are single-streamed into specialised channels that appeal to specific groups of audiences, segmenting viewers along language, race and class tiers. In the case of 8TV, it was a two-language station up until March 2016.¹⁷ This meant that there was a Chinese content belt during the day and an English content belt in the evening. At the time, 8TV's channel profile with regional broadcast research aggregator *ContentAsia*, states that 8TV is targeted at "urban youth and Chinese audiences" (8TV Channel Profile, 2015). By all indications, even while it targets the latter, they are the urban English-speaking or bilingual Chinese.

Narrowcasting is largely founded on commercial determinants with the intent of delivering very specific viewership to advertisers, though as a political implement, it can work to attract and categorise very specific groups of electorates. From the perspective of ethnic segregation, this dimension to television narrowcasting can work to entrench and potentially widen existing ethnic fissures. The presupposition of fixity to these lines of differences is reinforced by the "ethnicised channel" whose programming is designed for a particular ethnic category, indicating that the ethno-spatial marker draws its boundaries not just through the televisual content but also in imagining and constructing the channel as being ethnic.¹⁸ The tectonic pressures generated by the extensive broadcast legal framework and this practice of narrowcasting can instrumentalise 8TV in very specific ways – a consideration that is addressed in a later section of our inquiry.

ESTABLISHING THE SCENE

There were three PSAs in total, each featuring the same female Chinese protagonist within, presumably, the same *Ramadan* marketplace that was televisually populated by Malays. All similarly ended with the same homogenous message, delivered by three individuals – two men and a woman – dressed in traditional Malay-styled clothing.

PSA 1¹⁹: In a series of shots, the Chinese girl is depicted walking about a *Ramadan* market talking loudly, and unreservedly clapping both elderly men and women on the shoulders in a friendly manner.²⁰ Subsequently, the message, "[d]o not be loud or obnoxious" appears, and the girl now behaves in a more respectful and courteous manner, followed by the message, "[d]o be polite and discreet". It ends with three hosts dressed in Malay traditional attire saying, "[p]lease don't get carried away. Let's understand and respect the significance of *Ramadan*. *Selamat berpuasa* (happy fasting), from 8TV".

PSA 2: At the *Ramadan* market, the crowd moves away from the Chinese girl who exclaims, "everything looks so good. I must have it all!" In the next shot, she is shown holding a large selection of food which she eats, among Muslims who are still fasting. Still munching on food, she turns to a Malay woman and offers to share the food she is holding. The subsequent message reads, "[d]o not be greedy and eat in public". The following shot has her acting with more self-restraint, with the words "[d]o be considerate to others". It ends with three hosts dressed in Malay traditional attire saying, "[p]lease don't get carried away. Let's understand and respect the significance of *Ramadan*. *Selamat berpuasa*, from 8TV".

PSA 3: The Chinese girl walks about the *Ramadan* market dressed in a sleeveless and figure-hugging top. Her exposed shoulder blades are pixelated to indicate that it is censored. A Malay man looks on in disbelief. The girl reaches for a bunch of bananas hanging at a stall and her armpits are exposed. The crowd avert their eyes. Misinterpreting the attention, she exclaims, "I'm the centre of attention. I love it!" Incredulous at the sight, a father covers the eyes of his young daughter. Viewers are reminded, "[d]o not wear tight and revealing clothes". The Chinese girl is thereafter featured attired in Malay traditional dress with the accompanying message, "[d]o wear appropriate attire." It ends with three hosts dressed in Malay traditional attire saying, "[p]lease don't get carried away. Let's understand and respect the significance of *Ramadan*. *Selamat berpuasa*, from 8TV".

The online censure centred broadly on three primary objections.²¹ The first was the choice of a Chinese actor across all three PSAs. This was perceived to be racial typecasting especially when the corrective messages towards her behaviour were implicitly suggested as valid. The second was the differing sets of communal evaluation used in, what viewers thought to be, the selective denial of similar Malay behaviour. The third was dissatisfaction at yet another demand of accommodation for Malay-Muslim sensibilities especially when it was widely held that many concessions had already been made for Malay-Muslim interests throughout the years. Moreover, some viewers noted that, as the PSAs aptly demonstrated, there was a lack of respect towards the Chinese community even when respect was presumably asked of them.

The three PSAs were pulled off air shortly after the controversy escalated, and user-shared YouTube videos were removed under claims of copyright infringement by Media Prima's media distribution and licensing company, Grand Brilliance Berhad. One of Media Prima's first responses to the eruption of criticisms came from then Chief Operating Officer Ahmad Izham Omar who blithely tweeted on 2 August 2011, "Ok guys. We're pulling out the ads. Thank you very much

for your concern," followed by "[a]nd now to more important things... Does a horn section sound better with four trombones? Or would just three trombones be enough?" (Yow, 2011).

A public statement on 8TV's Facebook page was posted on the same day, expressing regret that a message of respect for the month of *Ramadan* was misinterpreted (8TV's Facebook page, 2011a). Many Facebook users who were vocal from the outset opined that this public relations exercise was inadequate. Firstly, the PSAs were aired on national television while Facebook is not equivalent to a national media platform, thus potentially failing to reach all of 8TV's viewers. Secondly, 8TV's statement was not an apology. When it became clear that the broadcaster was insistent on this non-apology and was in fact derisive, online public censure intensified (8TV's Facebook page, 2011a). On 3 August 2011, 8TV finally relented and apologised though many noted that the apology was, once again, offered "only" on 8TV's Facebook page (8TV's Facebook page, 2011b).²²

THE QUESTION OF CONTENT

Notwithstanding the responses of 8TV and Ahmad Izham, I contend that the PSAs are ideologically problematic. It is abundantly clear that the PSAs relied ideologically on the colonial stereotype of the ethnic Chinese as their primary semiotic vehicle. The instructions on "correct" behaviour airing on a channel with a primarily Chinese demographic is not incidental. To understand the autochthonous Malay-Muslim basis for the PSAs' ideological grounding, I employ Slavoj Žižek's transposition of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage.

The fundamental Lacanian (1949) human condition refers to the formation of the subject around an impossibility that represents the absolute disjuncture between the ego's symbolic system and the material real. The ego's first identification with its imaginary "other" crystallises its awareness of being separate from its material environment. This imaginary identification is subsequently organised by the entry of the symbolic "Other", actuating a worldview that structures the ego's imaginary perceptions and in the process, constitute their meanings. But a gap between the symbolic and the real is revealed when the symbolic "Other" generates the desire to act on the materially real without elucidating on the ends and the means.

If we transpose this Lacanian framework with Malay other as the object of desire, the ideological fantasy of a homogenous Malay Malaysia becomes the determinant for ethno-nationalist state trajectories. Žižek suggests that subjects are taught "how to desire" through this fantasy for it co-ordinates the frame of our desire. Therein lies its paradox, for desire is productive of fantasy, which in turn is deployed as a screen to conceal the gap revealed by the performative demand of the "Other" (Žižek, 1989: 132). In this sense, "desire itself is a defence against desire"

is tautological (Žižek, 1989: 132); a homogenous irredentist Malay nationhood exists only insofar as it is tautologically sustained by the Malay community's vested belief in it. This is productive of the gap between the symbolic discourse of *ketuanan Melayu/Islam* (Malay/Islamic primacy) and the increasingly globalised realities of urban 21st century Malaysia.²³ But this gap can never be closed, for the fantasy conceals the irreconcilability of both and is productive of the fantasmatic myth that an irredentist, racially pure Malay category existed before British Malaya, and is therefore a condition that is re-attainable by the Malays.²⁴ Let us transpose these onto the PSAs' metonymic chains and examine their televisual signifiers through the "quilting" process that structures these proto-ideological variables into a unified field (Žižek, 1989: 95).

Three socio-political sites of power for the early Malay empires were the *istana* (royal palace), the *masjid* (mosque), and the marketplace (Evers and Korff, 2000). As a site that facilitated trade, the marketplace was heterogeneous by virtue of its function as a confluence point for merchants and locals alike. Writing on transcultural diversity, Igor Gaon similarly paralleled the urban bazaar to a cultural melting pot where racism and xenophobia are absent, for diverse cultures are encouraged to create new bonds for an exchange of intercultural information (2006, 140). This culturally heterogeneous space is, however, transformed in the PSAs and reimagined tele-spatially into a site of Malay ethno-homogeneity, where the only non-Malay is a single Chinese protagonist.

It should be noted that while all traders in a *Ramadan* marketplace are Muslims, it does not follow that all who shop there are Muslims or Malays – a fact similarly observed in reality (presumably why these cautionary messages were needed). The PSAs thus communicate the aspiration for only intra-communal exchanges towards creating new intra-communal bonds and strengthening only Malay-Muslim solidarity. The PSA marketplace as irredentist Malay imaginary of nationhood, is thus the Lacanian-Žižekian fantasy of a homogeneous "Malay Malaysia" writ large on screen – the "national imagining" that Anderson observed was possible only through a phenomenon of modernity (Anderson, 1983: 33). By denying Malaya(sia)'s religious and ethnic heterogeneity, this dominant narrative of Malay autochthony is fantastically instrumentalised to frame Malay communal desire.

The entry of the Chinese into a homogeneous Malay site is symbolic; an asserted metaphor bearing meaning derived from historicity. Here we negotiate a twofold paradigmatic sequence – the entry of the Chinese protagonist and the overlay of its pre-determined behavioural stereotype. The televisual Chinese entry constructs a symbolic equivalence to the historical entry of Chinese immigrants²⁵ into the fantasmatic mono-ethnic Malaya,²⁶ constructing an us-them binary. This is the tautological *desire as a defence against desire*, actuated to conceal the gap revealed, for historicity attests to both religious and ethnic heterogeneity since

the early 6th century, and to the *Orang Asli* (Original People) as the true original inhabitants. The *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay primacy) rhetoric unearths these implicit inconsistencies within the fantasy, and simultaneously omits them from its discursive terrain. But what truly actuates this televisual signifier's connotative meaning is the next paradigmatic unit of the semiotic chain that affects a formulation of the identity "Chinese" as an undesirable racial category that shares similar traits with its stereotype during the period of British Malaya.

The British Malayan Chinese stereotype was exploitative, opportunistic, rude, and comparatively to the Malays, unrefined (*kasar*) in comportment. The Chinese protagonist's behaviour in the PSAs echoes these pre-independence traits, legitimising the need for the reminder to be (1) polite and discreet, (2) considerate, and (3) to dress and behave appropriately. Contrary to 8TV's and Izham's claims of non-racial intent, the PSAs' connoted ideological experience-vision is ascriptive, where without exception, it assigns and entrenches the essentialist-primordial character traits to the Chinese as a category. This is in fact, explicitly mentioned in the PSAs, crystallised tangibly in the words – (do not be) "loud or obnoxious", "greedy", and "tight and revealing clothes".

Its explicitness performs a twofold function. The Chinese are reminded of their inferior position within the nation's ethnically hierarchised socio-political structure; in effect, a reminder to assimilate and conform. This is clear from its express telecast on a "Chinese channel" and the choice of its protagonist. For the Malays however, it serves a converse function as a reminder that their superior position is legitimate. These are in fact, mnemonic triggers for the recurrent socio-political accusations of the Chinese as rude, opportunistic, and of generally being resistant to any meaningful Malay cultural assimilation.

There are at least two syntagmatic meanings that can be derived from this cluster of affective properties, both suggesting the Chinese subordinate position. The first presents the protagonist as behaviourally unrefined and actuates the rude-opportunistic arguments. Among other beliefs, the cultural salience of this performance is rooted in the notion that within the "cultural continuum of *kasar* and *halus* (from vulgarity to refinement)", a cultured/refined and pious individual occupies a "position of reverence in Malay society" (Wazir, 1992: 171, translation in original) (similarly observed by Brenner, 1995: 25–28, and broadly alluded to by Peletz, 1996). This notion is one central part of the PSA's cultural formulation of the identity "Chinese" as an undesirable racial category.

The second meaning builds upon this cultural binary of refinement-vulgarity, for the PSAs simultaneously demonstrate that the protagonist is by nature, unable or resistant to, culturally assimilating into the national Malay culture. On an emotive level, I propose that this activates a not uncommon view that the Chinese were graciously *allowed* citizenship to a mono-ethnic Malay nation at the time of independence, and yet refuse to conform with, or is oblivious to, the national culture.

In a Žižek-ian construction, the meaning of "Malay Malaysia" is thus retroactively fixed through an interpellation by the symbolic "Other" – the nodal point of the constitutional-autochthonous normative "Malays are Muslims, Muslims are Malays"²⁷ – which now organises its ideological field. The explicit mnemonic triggers connote the primordial Chinese typecast and its associative Malay position, though the true effect of signification-quilting occurs only when the typecast is relatable. Televisually, the metonymic chain of Chinese rudeness, disrespectfulness, and unrefinement – the connoted typecast – is only achieved when viewers relate to, and agree with, the need for the reminders on politeness and discretion, consideration, and appropriateness of dress and behaviour. The constitution of Malay superiority is similarly determined retroactively through the identification with Chinese inferior traits, explicit in the triggers of [do not be] "loud or obnoxious", "greedy", and "tight and revealing clothes". Each of these beliefs on each side of the religio-ethnic divide is the retroactive formulation of meaning in what Žižek calls "some mythical, pre-symbolic intention" where the subject is sutured to the signifier while simultaneously interpellating "individual into subject" through a master-signifier – "the point of subjectivation of the signifier's chain" (Žižek, 1989: 112). We are thus left not with the "Chinese are like that" ("that" being the typecast traits). Instead, the meaning is inverted to arrive at the transposition of "they are like that, because they are Chinese", where "because they are Chinese" refers not to tangible ascribed traits, but to what is *in Chinese, but more than Chinese*.²⁸ Thus, the true act of racism is in this "naming", where the signifier – the name "Chinese" – is ascribed to a certain indefinable biological identity beyond the traits connoted; to what is biologically inherent in all Chinese that transcends observable descriptors.

This act of racism is visually reinforced, where the Chinese actor's difference is made legible. With small eyes, slanted eyelids, and fairer complexion, her facial constructions – presumably in intent at least – draw parallels to Western caricaturisations of "Oriental" characters like Dr. Fu Manchu and Ming the Merciless that symbolised the Yellow Peril, thus named for the perceived cultural and racial threat of China (Sheshagiri, 2006: 162, 187–188). Considered together with the earlier symbolic Chinese entry into Malay-Malaysia, the PSA's caricaturisation would seem to assimilate this same Sinophobia with roughly the same implied meanings. This Žižekian "subject is sutured to the signifier" becomes explicit precisely because she is the exception to the market ethnic homogeneity.

On-screen sartorial depictions further strengthen her cultural non-conformity. This is especially clear at the end of PSA 3 where "dressing appropriately" is to culturally conform – visibly signified by the Chinese actor's "correct attire" of Malay traditional dress. The hosts at the end of the PSAs, while of arguably mixed parentage, reaffirm this demand for cultural conformity by delivering the reminders for "respect" and "signification" while similarly dressed in traditional Malay attire.

The Chinese protagonist's "inappropriateness" is further demonstrated by her culturally *kasar* comportment of unrestrained, excitable gesticulations and mannerisms as she interacts with the Malays and moves about the market. The intended shock effect of this televisually loud and boorish behaviour is further exaggerated by the framing and editing of the scenes. In all three PSAs, scenes meant to illustrate her culturally boorish mannerisms are tightly framed for greater focus on the specific offending/distasteful act. This visual technique is similarly deployed in framing Malay expressions of shock/consternation to accentuate the degree of disapproval, when faced with her behaviour.²⁹

The PSAs' significations on Islam are broadly similar. The PSAs were conceived as *Ramadan* messages, situated at a *Ramadan* marketplace, and it was Muslim sensibilities the protagonist needed to be mindful of. The televisual fantasmatic homogeneity discussed earlier extends fluidly to religiosity, where all PSA Muslims are Malays. But this is an inaccurate assertion, for while Islam is one criteria of constitutional Malay,³⁰ it does not state that all Muslims are Malays.³¹ The ideological conflation of Malay with Muslims introduces a second layer to the already complex irredentism of *ketuanan Melayu* to arrive at the ideological terrain of *ketuanan Islam* (Islamic primacy),³² experienced in the quotidian as inclusive (regardless of faith) national Islamisation policies (Gomez, 2008; Hussin, 1990; 1993; Liow and Afif, 2015; Ting, 2009).³³ The televisual suggestion of comparative Muslim considerateness and tolerance thus operationalises a perceived moral high ground of Malay-Muslims/Muslim-Malays. A similar retroactive construction of meaning occurs within this discursive formation to arrive at "they are like that, *because they are non-Muslims*", referencing a parallel signification structure, Islam, that is contrapuntal to the first "they are like that, *because they are Chinese*".

"Malay Malaysia", articulated as the conflated ideologies of *ketuanan Melayu* and *ketuanan Islam*, functions as a master sign that arrests the metonymic chains of "autochthony", "irredentism", "culture", "pivotal race", "Muslim", and organises their relevance contextually to each other. Through this prior organisation, the retroactive meaning given to this ideological fantasy appears as though it had existed fully from the start – that an irredentist, racially and religiously pure, pre-British Malaya Malay category existed, and is re-attainable. In this instance, the Malay other as object of desire is thus decentred, and is impossible to realise.

THE RACIST-RACIALIST DIALECTICAL PARADOX

Within Žižek's formulation, the ideological articulation of "Malay Malaysia" introduces a dialectical paradox that is tangentially productive of oppositional struggles in Malaysia (1989: 97). Calls for secular rights and wider democratisation for instance, are arguably only possible and exist only as responses to the

hegemonic Malay rights discourses. This represents the point of entry for the observably Chinese viewership's online censure, all made possible by reference to the fantasy of "Malay Malaysia". This very terrain of dispute provides the grammar of dissent, whose topology is shaped by the very exigency of the televisual fantasy communicated. This is a determining, totalising role that subsumes all oppositional struggles into itself as forms of its expression.

Žižek's ideological fantasy is fluidly transposed from the Malay context to the Chinese, yielding similar sets of issues on both sides of the ethnic divide. Though successful in eliciting an apology, Chinese viewers were operating with the same essentialist beliefs about race and religion that were contended. By alleging that 8TV's intent was racist, viewers were necessarily racialist in their decoding of the signification chain. One dimension to the racialist decoding was the ethnicised lens employed by viewers, prompting 8TV's and Izham's initial assertion that the PSAs were misinterpreted. The identification of Chinese as a category distinct from Malay – though the latter has been the referent for Malaysian identity since 1971³⁴ – punctuates the importance of ethnic identifiers over any national unit of identification.

In taking offense at the PSAs' portrayal of Chinese, one is arguably³⁵ imbricated in the act of identifying with "I am Chinese", where the imputation of ethnicised meaning-value by the signifier of the "name" Chinese provides an identification that excludes the subject from any truly integrative national discourse. By a similar process in the retroactive construction of meaning observed earlier, the imputation of meaning occurs with Chinese identification to arrive at "we are not like that, *because we are Chinese*". Here again, "because we are Chinese" refers not to tangible ascribed traits, but to what is *in Chinese, but more than Chinese* – what Žižek called the "unattainable X" (1989: 107). The fundamental difference between the imputation of meaning by the Chinese and Malays lie in their presumptions on the nature of this Chinese "unattainable X", for the PSAs suggest that the presumptions of the Malays were negative. The boundaries of integrative national discourse are thus delimited, and its terrain firmly posited within the field of racialist discursivity. In this manner, the dialectical paradox results in the same terrain of racist-racialist discursivity being reproduced and sustained through the multiple contrapuntal struggles that rely on the same dominant struggle of the fantasmatic "Malay Malaysia".

CONCLUSION

While it may require a stretch of one's imagination, the PSAs are arguably not entirely without progressive points. Ignoring the racial subtext, all three espouse the values of respect and consideration for others in the community. However,

foundational to its public censure was the attempt to establish an essentialist emphasis on the difference between the Malay-Muslims and non-Malay, non-Muslims. We have seen how this is fantasmatic, and Lacanian theory informs us of the aggressivity that accompanies the condition of the Oedipus complex, arising from the contradiction of identifying with the Malay other that works to negate the ego. History bears testament to this inherent Oedipal aggressivity accompanying the Malay ego, where Malay responses to Chinese agency are almost always inflected with violence.³⁶ This raises the question of whether aggression and its articulations as inter-communal violence represent the only recourse for a "recovery" of Malay essence.

The realities of race and religion – insofar as they are predicated on the pivotal supra-category of the Malay world, and the conflation of all who are non-Malays as non-Muslims – are premised on statist racial categories. From this perspective, the fundamental problematic to Malay(sian) identity appears to be the imposition of a primordial early-20th century Malay rubric on a globalised 21st century citizenry. It was clear that the *Ramadan* PSAs encapsulated the minority's generalised interpellation as Chinese, and secondarily as obnoxious-inconsiderate non-Muslims. Was it calculated to merit a protracted stance in the exteriorising of non-Malay-Muslim minorities? As we have discussed, the act of exteriorising was not singular to either the Malays or Chinese. That both were racist, racial, or racialist through the fundamental act of relating to the PSAs, actuated the primordial colonial discursive site of Malaysian race-contentions.

It would be unfair to deposit all blame on 8TV and suggest that it is able to singularly interpellate individuals into a racist mode of thinking. Subjective affects, and the experiences derived from sites of inter-communal exchanges and contestations, all represent the multitude of racial discourses that are then incorporated into a subjective state of racialist self-conception. In Žižekian form, the individual experience must exist to be triggered mnemonically, before the true meaning or identity derived through the retroactive process can occur. The racially emotive televisual imaginary of a homogenous Malay nationhood that was productive of public agreement and censure, was thus informed not by fully formed subjectivities of its producers, but by experiences that became ideologically operative under the exigencies of socio-political realities. Until there is a shift in the emphasis of these realities, it would be unrealistic to expect Malaysian broadcasters to truly transcend the constructed categories not defined solely through citizenship.

NOTES

1. Discussed in more detail later in this section.
2. UMNO is the dominant Malay political party in the government's ruling coalition *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). UMNO was formed in 1946 and has been in power since Malaysian independence in 1957.
3. Chinese and Indian communities have settled in the Peninsula since the 6th century and more predominantly in the 15th century, and are hybrid communities (the Straits Chinese, for example). When the Malays reference the Chinese in Malaysia, they are generally referring to the significant number of Chinese migrant labourers who were brought in by the British administration, and for a variety of reasons, became more economically successful than the "indigenous" Malays. These Chinese who had been domiciled in British Malaya for decades were eventually recognised as citizens with the nation's independence (see Enloe, 1967; Milner, 2011; and Roff, 1967; for detailed accounts).
4. The New Economic Plan (NEP) was part of the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971–1975, and lasted for 20 years. The NEP is also popularly referred to as the *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) policy (Shamsul, 1996: 27–28) since it was primarily seen as an ethnic preferential policy.
5. The National Culture Policy (NCP) of 1971 was implemented with the aim of creating a national culture through the assertion of Malay cultural and religious primacy (Ting, 2009: 38).
6. See Lopez (2015) for an overview of the past decade.
7. For example, UMNO revived the use of communal invectives against Malaysian Chinese after the 2004 general elections to consolidate power among the Malays (Case, 2015: 43; Marzuki, 2008: 35–41). These racist strategies have continued till the present.
8. These last two appear frequently in Malay ethno-nationalist rhetoric where non-Malay, non-Muslim Malaysian citizens with secular constitutional rights are often constructed as being indebted to the autochthonous Malays for being allowed these rights.
9. The earlier mentioned "Other Malays", "hybrid Malays", and "New Malays" for example.
10. *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) is the ruling coalition led by UMNO that includes comparatively smaller Chinese and Indian ethnic-based component parties.
11. The fifth FTA station is the Islamic station "TV Al-Hijrah" that is operated by the Department of Islamic Affairs Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM).
12. MPB-owned TV stations are TV3 (Malay channel), 8TV (a Chinese/English channel until 2016. It is now a Chinese station), NTV7 (Malay/English channel), and TV9 (Malay channel with Islamic content).
13. NSTP is Malaysia's largest publisher. NSTP publishes the English language *New Straits Times* (NST), and the Malay language *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* (Media Prima Berhad, 2012: 4).

14. See Foo (2004: 114–117, 119–124); Juriah (2000: 77–98, 134–135); Khattab (2006: 348–349); Roslina, Wan Amizah and Ali (2013: 53–55).
15. Established in 1981 by the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia for the promotion, preservation, and facilitation of the Malaysian film industry's development, it has jurisdiction over film and television content licenses.
16. FELDA represents one of the largest traditional vote banks for UMNO (Khor, 2014).
17. Before "The Quickie" programme ended on 31 March 2016, 8TV offered Chinese language programmes in the morning and day segments, while English programmes started from 8pm. 8TV is now a Chinese station, marketed by MPB as "Malaysia's No. 1 Chinese television station" (8TV, 2016). Our focus is on the Chinese-English model on which the PSAs were telecast.
18. Some examples are the works of Jane Gerhad (2005); Ivan Kwek (2011); Sharon Sharp (2006).
19. The PSAs are non-sequential and numbered here solely to facilitate our discussion.
20. Considered rude and disrespectful, especially to an elder. In Islam, physical contact between males and females is also avoided.
21. Collated from comments in Lowyat.net (2011) and YouTube (2011).
22. The three Facebook pages replete with viewer comments have since been removed and are no longer accessible. They were last accessed in May 2017.
23. I refer to the public discourse on wider democratisation and other secular-liberal ideas from socio-political vectors within the nation.
24. Milner (2011), Reid (2006), Roff (1967), and Vickers (2006) are but several who note that from as early as 6th century, the Malayan Peninsula was heterogeneous in ethnic composition.
25. One consequence of this large-scale migration was Malay economic recession, which became a primary source of inter-communal contentions. See Syed Hussein (2006), Reid (2006), and Vickers (2006) for more detailed accounts.
26. Indian and Chinese communities have lived in the Peninsula for centuries prior to the colonial introduction of Chinese and Indian immigrants. See Milner (2011).
27. The conflation of *ketuanan Melayu* with *ketuanan Islam* (Islamic supremacy) identified previously as symbolic "Other". *Ketuanan Islam* will be discussed in the proceeding section.
28. Adapted from Žižek's "rigid designator" where he provides the example of "in Jew more than Jew" (1989: 107).
29. A critical discussion from the perspectives of *mise-en-scene* and post/production techniques is possible. That will however, in more than one respect, exceed the scope of this paper.
30. Article 160(2) of the Federal Constitution defines Malay as a "person who professes the religion of Islam, who habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom" (Government of Malaysia, 2013: 152).
31. See Milner (2011) for an exploration of Malay and Malayness.
32. Case (2015), Daniels (2005), Gomez (2008), Husin (1985), Khoo (2013), Lopez (2015), and Ting (2009) are several who provide an extensive charting.

33. *Dakwah* (Islamic mission) has resulted in changing individual identifiers of Malay. An August 2015 Merdeka Centre report reflects, 60% of Malays identify first as Muslims, 27% as Malaysians, and only 6% as Malays – the last being a drop from 2005's 11% (Teo, 2015).
34. The National Culture Policy of 1971 sought to assimilate all other cultures into a national culture that was the dominant Malay culture (Ting, 2009: 38).
35. Beyond the broad interpretation of it being an offensive stereotype.
36. Race riots of 1969, "Red Shirts" outside Chinatown ("Provocation, racial slurs," 2015), Malay communal violence (Ding, 2010; Lopez, 2015: 327–330), are several examples.

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