



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

**THE USAGE OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN
FILMS**

Tan Su Peng

**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)
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**THE USAGE OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN
FILMS**

TAN SU PENG

This project is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)

Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts
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Received for examination by:

Yow Chong Lee

Date:

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ABSTRAK

THE USAGE OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN FILMS

Tan Su Peng

Kajian ini berkaitan dengan penggunaan pelbagai bahasa dan dialek dalam filem. Objektif kajian ini ialah mengkaji keberkesanan penggunaan bahasa termasuk dialek dalam dialog yang dapat difahami dan diterima umum. Hasil kajian mendapati penggunaan pelbagai bahasa seperti Bahasa Cina, Bahasa Inggeris, Bahasa Melayu dan dialek seperti Bahasa Hokkien dapat membantu penonton mengenali budaya sesuatu tempat. Hasil kajian ini telah diaplikasikan dalam filem pendek yang berjudul, 《武鬥》 “Forced”.

ABSTRACT

THE USAGE OF MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS IN FILMS

Tan Su Peng

This research aims to identify the usage of multiple languages and dialects in films. The objective of this research is to investigate the effectiveness of the usage of languages including dialects in the dialogues that can be understood and accepted. This research found that the usage of multiple languages (Chinese, English, and Malay) and dialect (Hokkien) could help the audience to identify the cultural of certain place. This research has been applied in a short film entitled, 《武門》 “Forced”.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia and Singapore are multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious countries since centuries ago. They are very special and unique countries in Asia as the citizen can accept each other and living in a harmonic society although they come from different backgrounds with their own languages.

Based on Oxford Dictionaries, Chinese means “a native or inhabitant of China, or a person of Chinese descent, or the language of China”. (Chinese, n.d.). This ethnic can be related to China or its people, culture or language. They have the significance in their lifestyle and languages, which is different from the other ethnics.

The migration of the Chinese to Malaya can be traced back to eighteenth and nineteenth century or even further. “In earlier time most of the Chinese migrants had been traders or shopkeepers, but now there was a growing emphasis on miners and agriculturalists. (Andaya.B.W & Andaya.L.Y, 1982: 97). The Chinese in Malaya comes from different states in China such as Fujian, Guangdong, Teochew, Henghua, Foochow and many more. At the very beginning, they came to Malaya as traders and shopkeepers. However, most the migrants of Chinese to Malaysia were became the miners and agriculturalists during 1980s.

According to Natesan, “the major reason for the Chinese emigration is because starvation, war and political corruption in mainland China.” (Natesan, 2013). They migrated to other places like Malaya was to escape the life of grinding poverty in China and searching for the wealth in other places during the wars. During that time, they served as coolies and work for the British government.

Due to the migration of the Chinese, the Chinese culture had been brought along when they came to this new society. As they come from different provinces in China, different types of Chinese cultures, languages, and dialects have been introduced in Malaya to the others races. Nowadays, most of the Chinese still maintaining and preserving their own cultures and languages through many activities such as “ Ai FM is the radio station which airs news in Teo Chew, Hakka, Cantonese and Hokkien daily”. (Ng, 2010). This is a way to learn different types of dialect through the news announced by the radio station.

In film industry, there are filmmakers who used different types of languages such as Mandarin, English, Malay, and dialects (Hokkien, Cantonese, and so on.) in the films such as *Sepeh* (2005) by Yasmin Ahmad and *Spinning Gasing* (2002) by Teck Tan. “The films used different ethnic languages such as Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and English to correctly capture a slice of real Malaysian life as opposed to a glossed-over version favoured by certain bureaucrats”. (Wee, 2006: 6). This is a good phenomenon in the film industry.

The Chinese filmmakers, Chiu Keng Guan and Jack Neo have used different types of languages in their films, such as *Great Day* (2011), *Woohoo* (2010), and *I Not Stupid Too* (2006). Both of them have inserted the local languages and dialects, which

can represent the society of the country into their films. Hence, their films can be considered as local films, which the stories are based on the local society and cultures. Their films may not be well received or hit the box office outside the countries, but it is a good opportunity to promote Malaysia and Singapore's cultures to the other countries.

Vernacular languages (dialects) play an important role in the Chinese films in both Malaysia and Singapore. As in Oxford Dictionaries, dialect means, "a particular form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region or social group." (Dialect, n.d.). Dialects can be defined as the languages used in certain geographical boundaries. Different states have different dialects and accent. It is used to differentiate the people from their origins and cultures. Same dialect can be spoken in different accent at different place although the meaning is the same. With the accent speak, it is easy to identify where they come from.

The most common used of dialects for the Chinese filmmakers in both countries will be Hokkien and Cantonese. This is because the people who come from Fujian and Guangdong are the largest populations among the Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore, which their mother tongues are Hokkien and Cantonese. Hence, there are more Chinese speak Hokkien and Cantonese than the other dialects.

Chiu Keng Guan, a Hokkien-Chinese filmmaker in Malaysia had made a film named *Great Day* in year 2011. "He has a determination to promote Chinese-Malay values, the movie is another cultural gauntlet thrown down to help revive Chinese language filmmaking in the country beyond small budget." (Darek.W, 2011). Chiu has successfully inserted the dialects into his films and the films are well-received in Malaysia. He intends to make a local film, which reflects of the real society in Malaysia.

On the other hand, Jack Neo is a famous filmmaker in Singapore. “He could be said to be the new P. Ramlee, a Chinese version. He started off as a multitalented entertainer, and then went on to acting in films, before becoming a prolific director still playing in his own movies.” (Millet, 2006: 88). Neo has won a lot of awards since he started his filmmaking career. Neo is very capable in mixing up different types of languages and his films interesting and humorous.

“Humour can be defined as something that makes a person laugh or smile. There are several guides to use the language. For example, the humour must be verbal, either written or spoken; it will generally be intentional, though perhaps based on inadvertent slips of the tongue; and the aspects should be diverse enough to allow extended comment.” (Ross, 1999). Humour can bring a lot of fun and happiness to the people. It can create a harmonious mood in the society.

In the journal with the title ‘How Movie Dialogue Mirrors Our Unconscious Mimicry’ written by Philip Ball in year 2011, he mentioned that most of the movies like to use the dialogue with convergence. According to him, the dialogue used in the movie is the reflection of real life so that the audience can easily catch the points or the messages of the movie. He mentioned that the language or the dialogue used in movie is the reflection of the real world and certain words inside the movie will become the tag of people in their lives.

Besides, dialogue can become a sound effect in films. When a scriptwriter writes the dialogue for a script, he or she has to pay attention on the style, the punctuation of the sentences. The design of the dialogue depends on the creativity and aesthetic preferences of each scriptwriter. Dialogue is an important element for a scene construction as

everyone is creating dialogue with each other every day. “It is easy and plays on the stage become much more effective than a series of shots and transitions.” (Neal Romanek, 2011). This depends on the creativity of the scriptwriter as the scriptwriter can decide the length of the dialogue. If it is necessary to have a long dialogue to explain something, the scriptwriter will not purposely change the long dialogue to several short dialogues. Hence, dialogue can be directly communicated to the audience without giving them the visual images and it is very important for a scriptwriter to figure out when writing a script.

In conclusion, language is the most basic communication tool for a person to contact with others. This research focuses on the languages, which are the oral languages used in films. It will also focus and discuss on the use of dialect in films. The researcher will focus on writing the dialogue that will show out the localised language of certain place. The details will be widely discussed in Chapter 2, 3 and 4.

1.1 Problem Statement

In film industry, oral language can be considered as the soul of a film. It is used to deliver certain instruction or information through the dialogue to the audience. Without language, a film will be difficult to deliver the messages and information to the audience. Although there are films without any dialogue, most of the filmmakers will use dialogues to enhance the story in the films.

In the magazine, *Movii*, Namewee had said “if film can represent the real life, we truly have to communicate and interact with different kind of races if we live in Malaysia. It is a very normal phenomenon. It is also a special culture of Malaysia. In my opinion, if a Malaysian’s film only has one language or one race, it will be very weird because it is

not real.” (Cited from Danae, 2012: 52). This is the reason for this director to use different types of languages and ethnics in his film. Obviously, the best way to introduce the local culture of Malaysian through the film is to add in different types of languages and ethnics.

However, the acceptability of the usage of multiple languages and dialects in films is an issue in the society as the mainstream cinema in Malaysia only accepting one language, which is Bahasa Malayu instead of other languages and dialects. Hence, the motive to do this research is to explore and test the usage of multiple languages and dialects in films and the reasons for the filmmakers to use multiple languages and dialects in the films.

1.2 Research Objective

Oral language is a tool for normal people to express their feeling and opinions to the others, as well as the films. Films use oral language to enhance the story and bring out the messages from the director to the audience so that the audience can understand the films easily. Hence, there are several objectives to be achieved in this research.

1. To explore the way to insert different types of languages in films by focusing on several films directed by Jack Neo and Chiu Keng Guan.
2. To determine the function of the dialects in films.
3. To explore the design of dialogue and its effects on films.

1.3 Research Questions

Although it has films that did not insert the oral languages, most of the films will insert it as an important medium to support the films. Different countries, different social background and different directors will use different types of oral languages in the films. In order to collect the information for this research, the researcher has discovered three research questions, which are:

1. How to insert different types of languages in a film?
2. How dialects are effectively used in films?
3. How to design the dialogue for a film?

1.4 Research Scope

In this research, the researcher will pay attention to the different types of languages used in the selected films, which are *I Not Stupid Too* (2006) by Jack Neo and *Woohoo* (2010) by Chiu Keng Guan. It focuses on the usage of multiple languages and not the ethnics in films as it is aimed to show the local languages through a film.

Besides, there are different types of Chinese dialects within the countries. The dialect that is focused by the researcher is Hokkien. Meanwhile, Foochow, Mandarin, English and Malay will be added in the short film, which is produced by the researcher. The researcher will focus on the dialogues that are mixed with different types of languages in the film.

At the same time, this research will not focus on the other subjects such as directing, camera angles, shots, editing, sound design, and set design in the films.

1.5 Hypothesis

Different locales have different languages and dialects, which are associated with the history of the locales. Language, mostly dialect, can represent the culture for certain locales and that makes it unique and special. The effective use of dialect in film can bring out the identity of the place with geographical attachment.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Literature Review

“During British colonial, a large population of Chinese was imported to Malaya and served as miners and agriculturalists. This had brought some changes in the Malay-society and later become a multiracial society”. (Lee, 1990: 484; Andaya.B.W & Andaya.L.Y, 1982: 97). With the migration of the Chinese from China to Malaya, the Chinese cultures and languages had been brought to the Malaya. This has made an impact to the Malaysia and Singapore, where multiracial population is one of the characteristics in both countries. Both countries also shared the same history and culture before Singapore got her Independence in year 1965.

The Chinese in Malaya comes from different states and backgrounds in the China. “One factor that divided the migrant Chinese community was their dialect. In China, it has numerous dialects which are distinctly different from each other. Normally, Teochiew and Cantonese from Guangdong; Hokkien from Fujian; Hakka from mountain areas of Guangdong, Guangxi and Fujian; and Hainanese from the island of Hainan. There were also numbers of Kwongsai, Henghua, Hok Chiu and Hok Chhia people.” (Jim Baker, 2008: 96-97 ; Andaya.B.W & Andaya.L.Y, 1982: 140). Hence, it has created a

multi-culture society among the Chinese in Malaya. No matter which dialect do the people speak, they are the local Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore nowadays.

Besides Malaya, there is incidence shows that the migration of the Chinese from China to Sarawak has been occurred since centuries ago. In an article with the title “The People and Culture of Sarawak” published by the All Borneo Connection Tours Sdn. Bhd. (n.d.), the Chinese first came to Sarawak as traders and explorers in the 6th century. They came in different dialects groups where Hakka migrants worked as labourers in the gold mines at Bau or on plantation. The Hokkien and Teochew migrants worked as the businessmen or traders whereas the Hainan migrants were well known as coffee-shop operators and the Henghua migrants were the fishermen. They are the dominant dialects spoken within their own dialect groups. With that, different types of dialects had been brought to the Sarawak and become a unique culture of Sarawak since then.

Language, no matter is the oral language, written language or the body language, plays an important role in our daily lives. It is the most basic tool for everyone in daily conversation. Without language, people would face the difficulty in communicating with others in their daily lives. According to Sapir (1921), language is the purely human and non-instinctive method for communicating ideas, emotion, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols (p.8). Hence, language is the way for everyone to express and deliver the ideas, emotion, and desires in their daily lives.

In a survey with the title “The 50 Most Widely Spoken Languages” written by Sarojanand Jha (n.d.) in Maithili, the most common languages used in Malaysia and Singapore are Mandarin, English, Javanese, and Tamil. English has become the common language is due to the history of Malaysia and Singapore, while the other languages

represent their own races which are Malay, Chinese, and Indian, three of the biggest groups in both countries. Besides the standard language, it still has vernacular language (dialect) in the countries such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Foochow, and many more. However, not many Chinese can speak their mother tongue (dialect) easily due to the educational system in the countries are focus on the formal languages, which are English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. This is because the standard language is the language that spoken by the educated in the society and it is the language that supported and encouraged by the schools in both Malaysia and Singapore.

There are different ways to define vernacular language or dialect. Vernacular language is commonly defined as “a language, which has not been standardized and which does not have official status. Vernaculars are usually the first language learned by the people in multilingual communities, and they are often used for a relatively narrow range of informal function.” (Lamhot, 2012: 2). It is an informal language, which usually is used when talking to family and friends in an informal function. This means that dialect is used in daily communication with friends and families at informal events or activities. This is why less and less Chinese especially younger generation wants to learn their own dialect as they think it is not important.

The majority of Chinese dialect group in Malaysia and Singapore is the Hokkien and Cantonese as Dr. Jak Cambria had written in his article called “Overseas Chinese in Malaysia” (2010). He mentioned that the Chinese migrants mostly came from Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Hence, the Hokkien and Cantonese automatically become the most common dialects in both countries. The only difference is the phonology of the

dialects in different states. However, the Hokkien used in Johor, Klang and Malacca is the most similar with Singaporean Hokkien.

Hokkien is a widely used dialect in Asian. The name, Hokkien, is differently named according to the geographical area. The Hokkien spoken in Taiwan will call this dialect as “Taiyu” with the meaning of Taiwanese’s language whereas the other name for this dialect is “Min Nan Yu”. Besides, “the dialect also involved in the entertainment industry where films and songs were directed in order to produced the Taiwanese identity”. (Taylor, 2007: 3). Many Taiwanese’s films and songs albums include Hokkien in their works such as Jay Chou (a talented and famous Taiwanese entertainer) inserts this language into his songs and films. Hokkien can be said as a local accent for the Taiwanese as they have used it at many domains. However, the phonology of this dialect has a little bit different at different places but those who used to speak this dialect will easily catch the meaning if they meet a Hokkien-spoken person from the other places. In Malaysia, the Hokkien “jia ba ber” means asking people whether they have eaten or not, whereas in Singapore, this word will be “jia ba buei” with the same meaning.

In the film industry, Malaysia and Singapore shared the same history, as Singapore is part of Malaya before she gets Independence. In the films made by the Chinese filmmakers in Malaysia and Singapore, a mixed up of languages and dialects has been inserted to the films such as *I Not Stupid Too* (2006) by Jack Neo, and *Woohoo* (2010) by Chiu Keng Guan. A reporter had conducted an interview with Chiu and the scriptwriter (Yong Chang) for the film *Woohoo* 2010. In the report, Chiu said that “We want to make a 100% Malaysian film even an extra, he still has to be a Malaysian, not the foreigner. It should use 100% of the local languages to bring out the culture of the society.

The language speak by the Chinese in Malaysia is informal which has mixed with dialects, Malay, English and Mandarin. It is a kind of “*Rojak*” Mandarin. It is the real phenomena that can represent the Chinese in Malaysia and we want to make a film with that phenomenon.” (Tam, 2010). It is a good way to promote and introduce the local Chinese culture in Malaysia to the public. This is because each dialect has its own pronunciation, which is a little bit different from the other states when add in English and Malay. Hence, the public can gain the information of the living style in Malaysia through the films.

On the other hand, “the style of Jack Neo’s films is Hokkien comedy, which is a distinct style that not everyone can imitate easily. This means that when you want to shoot a film in a particular language, you must understand the background and nuances of the language in order to make the dialogues have character”. (Tzang Merwyn Tong, 2011: 101). Neo had done a lot of research on dialect, mostly Hokkien. He knows exactly how to use this dialect to hook the audience. He knows the styles of the people who speak dialect and the common words that most of the people will know such as “*si liao*” (already dead), “*jia ba buei*” (have you eaten?), and “*nin ah ba*” (your father or simply mean “I”). With that, Neo’s films that have been inserted with multi-culture and background of the society can be called as “localised product” in Singapore.

In Neo’s films, language – especially oral language – plays an important role in delivering ideas and information to the audience. When he writes the script, he uses a lot of dialect for the character as he tries to closely recreate a typical Singaporean’s everyday life. While Neo’s films use Mandarin, Malay, and English, his films make particular use of dialect – especially, the Southern Chinese dialects of Hokkien and Cantonese.

Examples can be found in films he had made such as *The Ghost Must Be Crazy* (2011), *Money No Enough 2* (2008), *I Not Stupid* (2002), and *I Not Stupid Too* (2006).

Besides the languages, script is also a necessary and basic ingredient in making films. In order to write a bestselling script, the scriptwriter has to do in-depth research for his or her topic and the ways to catch the attention of the producer and director. “When your script is read, nine times out of ten, it is the dialogue that will be scanned most closely, to the extent that sometimes crucial stage directions can get skipped”. (Bicât & Macnabb, 2002: 40). Hence, a scriptwriter not only focuses on the attractiveness of the story but also the structure of dialogues in films. This is because the producer and director is the busiest person in the industry. In order to sell the script, the scriptwriter can write the dialogues by using simple words and sentences (high-school level standard) instead of difficult vocabulary. As a result, a good dialogue can easily catch the attraction from them rather than a full script.

“Speech pattern and phrases are often associated with particular communities. It is not simply a matter of dialect; it is also the slang and the level of formality or informality that differs from one community to the next”. (Cooper.P & Dancyger.K, 2005: 143). Different dialects have different types of pronunciation followed by cultural background of each state. It is better to do some research on the characteristic of each dialect or slang before writing the dialogues for a film as the phonology of the each language and dialect is not the same at different states or different cultural backgrounds. Hence, the scriptwriter has to clearly know about the characters and their backgrounds before writing the dialogues for them.