

Local film barred for 'undermining national security'

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SINGAPORE—A documentary film about self-professed exiles — including members or supporters of the now-

defunct Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) — who are living overseas has been barred from distribution or exhibition here.

Announcing its decision to classify the 70-minute film *To Singapore,*

With Love — which has garnered accolades overseas — as Not Allowed for All Ratings (NAR), the Media Development Authority (MDA) said yesterday its contents “undermine national

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security because legitimate actions of security agencies to protect national security and stability of Singapore are presented in a distorted way as acts that victimised innocent individuals”.

“The individuals in the film have

given distorted and untruthful accounts of how they came to leave Singapore and remain outside Singapore,” the MDA said, adding that the Government has made it clear that it would allow former CPM members to return if they agree to be interviewed by the authorities on their past activities to resolve their cases.

The film by local director Tan Pin Pin centred on the exiles — some who have not returned for 50 years — ruminating about their lives away from

Singapore. The interviewees included student-leader-turned-political-exile Tan Wah Piow and former Barisan Sosialis member Wong Soon Fong. It has won Ms Tan multiple international awards, including Best Director at the Muhr Asia Africa Documentary Awards at the Dubai International Film Festival last year.

The film was slated for screening at a tentative event by the National University of Singapore (NUS) Museum at the end of the month, along with

DIRECTORS, ARTISTS RESPOND

● About 40 members of Singapore's film-making and arts community have expressed their 'deep disappointment' at the Media Development Authority's decision and urged the authority to reconsider it.

“The MDA claims that the subjects in Ms Tan (Pin Pin)'s film gave 'distorted and untruthful accounts of how they came to leave Singapore and remain outside Singapore'. We would like to suggest that rather than banning the documentary, the authorities release their version of the events in question, so that viewers can make up their own minds. Indeed, we note that the MDA has already published a detailed press release stating their official account,” they said in a statement yesterday.

The 38 signatories included well-known filmmakers Anthony Chen, Royston Tan, Martyn See, and arts practitioners such as Janice Koh, Ivan Heng and T Sasitharan.

two other films by Ms Tan — *Invisible City* (2007) and *Singapore GaGa* (2005). NUS Museum had submitted the film to the MDA for classification.

Elaborating on its decision, the MDA pointed out that the CPM had sought to “overthrow the legitimate elected governments of Singapore and Malaysia through armed struggle and subversion, and replace them with a communist regime”. Citing examples of “distorted and untruthful accounts”, the MDA said an interviewee in the film said he had no choice but to join the CPM after he left Singapore when, in fact, he was an active CPM member even before he left Singapore.

Two others featured in the film also “conveniently omitted mentioning their criminal offences which they remain liable for, such as tampering with their Singapore passports or absconding from National Service” — an attempt to whitewash their security histories, as the MDA put it.

“The individuals featured in the film gave the impression that they are being unfairly denied their right to return to Singapore. They were not forced to leave Singapore, nor are they being prevented from returning,” it said.

Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said he supported the MDA's assessment. Individuals who have chosen to leave and remain outside Singapore, and refused to account for their past actions, “should not enjoy a public platform to purvey distorted and untruthful accounts to mislead the public, absolve themselves or deny their past actions”.

Ms Tan said she was very disappointed with the authority's decision. She said she made the film because she wanted to better understand Singapore. “I was also hoping that the film would open up a national conversation to allow us to understand ourselves as a nation better too ... It is vital for us to have that conversation on our own terms, especially on the eve of our 50th birthday.” Ms Tan said she may re-submit the film for a rating in future. For now, she said she has no plans to upload the film on YouTube — a platform that some other filmmakers had used to evade censorship.

Political analyst Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, said that if the views of these political exiles were to be easily and widely available, it could deal a “severe injustice” to those who suffered during the violent confrontation.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Siew Kum Hong felt that it is natural for history to have different narratives and accounts, and what the MDA did “is to insist that the government's official account is the one, single unequivocal truth”.

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon noted that personal narratives are bound by subjective interpretation. “A discerning audience would watch the film with this in mind,” she said. “Instead of banning the film, the authorities could have used this opportunity to dispute their accounts. A determined audience would gain access via other means, especially with new media.”

● The last film to be given an NAR rating was *Sex, Violence, Family Values* in 2012. The film was reclassified as R21 with edits.

● In 2007, *Zahari's 17 Years* — a film about former Internal Security Act detainee Said Zahari — was banned by the Government.