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Chapter 9: Silver Screen Reversals of the Domino Theory: American Cold War Movies and the Re-imagining of Britain's Experience in Southeast Asia[1]

By Wen-Qing Ngoei (Singapore Management University)

From *Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and Darlene Machell Espena (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2024), 167-183.

Abstract

This essay argues that, as US involvement in Vietnam deepened, films such as *The 7th Dawn* (1964) and *King Rat* (1965) served as cultural spaces in which an American victory over Asian communism was envisioned, performed and contested. *The 7th Dawn* portrays Britain's anticommunist struggle in 1950s Malaya, showing how a US counterinsurgency expert (played by American William Holden) uses his skills to contribute to the defeat of the Malayan Communist Party's charismatic leader. *King Rat*, set in Japanese-occupied Singapore toward the end of World War Two, has a lowly American corporal employing his ingenuity to thrive in the P.O.W. camp while other prisoners, including high-ranking British officers, know only suffering. These films indulged fantasies that Americans might appropriate and/or supersede British experiences in Southeast Asia. Indeed, they articulated a palpable optimism about US involvement in Southeast Asia while wrestling with the fatalism of President Eisenhower's "domino theory" that communism would sweep Southeast Asian countries one by one. Through a study of these films, this essay reveals the dynamic mingling of promise and peril in the conflicted American mind about the United States' Cold War encounter with Southeast Asia in the 1960s.

Keywords: Cold War; Southeast Asia; Domino Theory; Malayan Emergency; Singapore; Britain

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[1] This chapter adapts material from the author's book, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019). All rights reserved. Additionally, the author thanks his research assistant, Lee Tat Wei, for his valuable work in support of producing this essay.

Introduction: Cold War Southeast Asia and the Domino Theory

In early 1954, when Viet Minh garrisons began surrounding French forces at Dien Bien Phu, US officials looked expectantly to President Dwight Eisenhower for signs that he would commit American ground forces to Vietnam. The United States was already responsible for funding much of France's anticommunist campaign in Indochina. Now, with the possibility of French defeat looming, the moment seemed to call at last for direct US military intervention. Eisenhower himself had enunciated America's stakes in Cold War Southeast Asia in his inaugural address the previous year. The conflict, he had stated, meant "freedom… pitted against slavery; lightness against the dark." It was for this freedom and light, he implied, that "the French soldier… die[d] in Indochina, the British soldier [was] killed in Malaya, [and] the American life given in Korea."[2] He believed that the insecurity of Southeast Asia's states impinged upon western power and, importantly, US positions across Asia, their fates interconnected like a row of dominoes.[3] Surely Vietnam, tottering at the head of that row, was where America must now resolve to hold the line? The members of Eisenhower's National Security Council likely thought so. Yet, the president told his officials that he simply "could not imagine the United States putting ground troops anywhere in Southeast Asia, except possibly in Malaya." [4]

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[2] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Inaugural Address", 20 January 1953, *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-3; Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 1, 44.

[3] Eisenhower, "The President's News Conference", 7 April 1954, *The American Presidency Project,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-361.

[4] Memorandum of Discussion at the 179th Meeting of the National Security Council, Friday, 8 January 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (*FRUS*), 1952-1954, vol. 13, pt. 1,

Why Malaya? Because, even as this British colony transitioned toward independence in the 1950s, Britain and its local allies struggled against the guerrilla fighters of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). For the United States, it was especially important that the MCP was almost entirely ethnic Chinese—this had fueled US suspicions that Beijing was pulling the MCP's strings, that seizing Malaya was part of China's plan to use its ten-million strong diaspora in Southeast Asia to subvert West-friendly governments throughout the region. US concerns about a Chinese fifth column rising against British power in Southeast Asia were certainly intensified by presumptions that the ethnic Chinese of Malaya, comprising nearly forty percent of the country's population, instinctively pledged their allegiance to Beijing. For US officials, a similar pall hovered over Singapore to the south of Malaya, a country more than three-quarters ethnic Chinese and the location of Britain's prime military bases in the region. There, the MCP's infiltration of middle schools, trade unions and cultural organisations at times seemed even more threatening to British and US interests. In the late 1950s, US officials were so concerned that Singapore's "extreme leftists" would triumph that they considered military action to bolster Britain's weakening hold on the country. Put simply, Britain's Cold War efforts in Malaya and Singapore—how it fought the communist insurgency and political subversion, and steered decolonisation in favour of London—had far-reaching regional consequences in Eisenhower's view.[5] Not only that, the president harboured an enduring pessimism about the future of the declining British Empire and wider Southeast Asia, a pessimism captured in the

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Indochina, 1952-1954, ed. Neil H. Petersen (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), Document 949.

[5] Ngoei, "The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment: The Fall of Singapore, the Atlantic Echo Chamber, and 'Chinese Penetration' in US Cold War policy toward Southeast Asia," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 215-245; "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 2 (2021): 240-252.

"falling domino principle" he deployed in 1954 to forecast how just one country toppling to communism meant the region would "go over very quickly" and bring a "disintegration… most profound."[6]

US Cold War Cinema and Southeast Asia in the 1960s

It is little surprise, then, that elaborations of such pessimism about US involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia permeate US films about the Vietnam conflict, particularly those—like the first two *Rambo* instalments (*First Blood*, 1982; *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* 1985)—that popularised themes of American loss and humiliation during the decade or so following the US military debacle in Indochina.[7] However, attending to such movies obscures the more complex reality of US Cold War attitudes toward Southeast Asia as a whole even as the Vietnam War raged. Indeed, American films of the 1960s that focused on British experiences in Malaya and Singapore—the very countries that once worried Eisenhower more than Vietnam—exuded a qualified (if conflicted) optimism about US prospects in Southeast Asia. The films analysed here, United Artists' *The 7th Dawn* (1964) and Columbia Pictures' *King Rat* (1965), contrast starkly with the overrepresented themes of US failure in, and despair about, Southeast Asia that

[6] Eisenhower, The President's News Conference, 7 April 1954.

[7] For discussions of Vietnam War films along these lines, see examples like Frank Sweeney, "'What Mean Expendable?': Myth, Ideology and Meaning in *First Blood* and *Rambo*," *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 3 (1999): 63-69; D.L. Sutton and J.E. Winn, "'Do We Get to Win this Time?': POW/MIA Rescue Films and the American Monomyth," *Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 1-2 (2001): 25-30.

have animated most Vietnam War films.[8] After all, Britain and its local allies in Malaya (Malaysia from 1963) and Singapore ultimately succeeded. By the early 1960s, Malaya's indigenous nationalists had routed the MCP with the support of British Commonwealth forces; Singapore's anticommunist politicians, in turn, had used Britain's counterinsurgency tools to overcome their socialist rivals at home, rivals whose politics were born of Beijing's efforts to woo its Southeast Asian diaspora.[9] Malaya's and Singapore's heartening trajectories went on to exert a considerable impact upon US strategy toward the region. American leaders commissioned symposia to pick the brains of British and Australian military men who had served in Malaya; sent South Vietnamese soldiers to learn counterinsurgency in Malaya's jungle warfare school; demanded studies of how British, Malayan and Singaporean efforts won the "hearts and minds" of locals; and courted the leaders of both newly independent Southeast Asian nations.[10]

So much for Washington. How was Hollywood affected by the reversals of the domino theory in Malaya and Singapore that unfolded in the early 1960s alongside Vietnam's mounting crisis? This essay argues that *The 7th Dawn* and *King Rat* served as cultural spaces for envisioning, performing and contesting the possibility that Americans might appropriate and/or supersede Britain's experiences in Malaya and Singapore. *The 7th Dawn*, set in 1950s Malaya, appropriates and attempts to Americanise Britain's vaunted counterinsurgency methods in the conflict against the MCP. It is a clear, if crude, gesture at the expansion of US military

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[8] *The 7th Dawn*, dir. Lewis Gilbert (1964, Beverly Hills: CA, United Artists; MGM, 2011); *King Rat*, dir. Bryan Forbes (1965, Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures). Both films were adapted from novels: Michael Keon, *The Durian Tree* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960); James Clavell, *King Rat* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1962).

[9] Ngoei, "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia."

[10] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, chapters 3 and 4.

involvement in Vietnam in the mid-1960s which ponders the potential for American success. *King Rat* is the story of an American prisoner of war (POW) in Japanese-occupied Singapore during World War Two, a lowly corporal who thrives despite the dominance of a hostile Asian power while emaciated British POWs around him suffer pathetically. These films reflected and complicated Washington's burgeoning optimism in their contemporaneous moment. For, to some degree, they mirrored the sentiments of US policymakers, conveying confidence about America's growing presence in Southeast Asia, believing that when US pursuits were intertwined in various ways with British experiences in Malaya and Singapore, America might somehow triumph. By contrast, in the fictional country of Sarkhan—*The Ugly American's* (1963) a stand-in for South Vietnam and Thailand—US elites (one played by Marlon Brando) were portrayed as stupidly and regularly undermining their own anticommunist cause in Southeast Asia.[11] Then again, the streak of confidence in *The 7th Dawn* and *King Rat* escaped neither the despondency felt by Americans within and beyond policymaking circles when it came to Vietnam nor the sense of crisis inherent in the domino theory. As this essay points out, these two films also communicated deep US anxiety over the imminent collapse of all that their American characters achieved, their personal victories thrown into jeopardy or irretrievably tainted by the unsavoury measures employed to achieve them.

Recovering this trajectory in Cold War-era American films set in Southeast Asia is invaluable. It is more characteristic of the geostrategic developments in the region during the 1960s and more reflective of the conflicted American mind with respect to US intervention in Southeast Asia at the time. Scholars of Cold War cinema have, after all, underscored that

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[11] *The Ugly American,* dir. George Englund (1963, Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures). The film was adapted from the bestselling 1958 novel of the same name by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, first published by W.W. Norton & Company.

Hollywood followed rather than dictated the cultural milieu of Cold War America.[12] In that cultural milieu, non-elite support for US commitments to Vietnam was "broad but also shallow," ever wary of their nation's escalating involvement.[13] At the same time, middlebrow Americans long interested and invested in their nation's courting of post-1945 East and Southeast Asia were well aware of, as well as cheered by, the successes of anticommunist nationalists and British policies in Malaya.[14] Malayan Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had made an impressive splash during his first official visit to the United States in 1960. American journalists came to describe him as a skillful orator (he spoke "excellent English"), a "delightful dinner companion with many Western interests," and a man of culture who authored plays and movie scripts.[15] When Eisenhower met the Tunku, he emphatically declared the Malayan leader one of America's "staunchest friends" in the Cold War.[16] Not long after, *Reader's Digest*, widely circulated and read in the United States, spread word of how the "happy land of Malaya" had "brilliantly executed" a war against the MCP guerrillas.[17] By early 1963, Americans learned that President John F. Kennedy thought the creation of Malaysia—uniting

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[12] Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 19.

[13] Fredrik Logevall, "Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2004): 104.

[14] Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 103-104.

[15] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 121.

[16] Eisenhower, Toasts of the President and the Prime Minister of Malaya, 26 October 1960, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/toasts-the-president-and-the-prime-minister-malaya.

[17] William J. Lederer, "The Guerrilla War the Reds Lost," *Reader's Digest,* May 1962.

Malaya, Singapore and British territories in Borneo—the "best hope of security" in Southeast Asia, for this new federation could offer powerful resistance to communism in the region.[18] Both *The 7th Dawn* and *King Rat* evince these interwoven strands of American optimism and wariness about US involvement in 1960s Southeast Asia.

However, studies of American cinema have little to say about how these two films performed the American view of US-Southeast Asian relations during the Cold War. This is understandable, to an extent. Historian Tony Shaw explains that in the early twentieth century, Hollywood reflected America's fear of communism as primarily a domestic threat that arose from corrupt elements within the United States, not an international rivalry against the Soviet Union.[19] (The USSR had, in any case, been an ally of the United States during the Second World War.) At the same time, scholars note how readily Hollywood during the Cold War began projecting America's older dread of communism onto an external antagonist, demonising the Soviets or Chinese—and sometimes, malevolent extraterrestrials as in *The Thing* (1951), *Invaders from Mars* (1953) and *Killers from Outer Space* (1954)—while also touting America's "capitalist-based creativity and… the superiority of democracy's freedom of spirit" through extravagant Biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* (1956).[20] Of course, alongside the pro-US and anticommunist themes of such Hollywood productions, critical

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[18] John F. Kennedy, The President's News Conference, 14 February 1963, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-159.

[19] Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 2.

[20] Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War,* 21, 26; J. Hoberman, *Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (New York: New Press, 2011), 166-168, 200.

American filmmakers of the 1960s crafted films such as *Dr. Strangelove* and *Fail-Safe* (both released in 1964) that questioned long-held truths such as whether the United States truly represented virtue and goodness in the Cold War rivalry.[21]

The scant attention scholars give to Hollywood's depictions of US involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia is unfortunate and ironic. For, Washington had poured copious amounts of blood and treasure into Southeast Asia from the 1950s onward, not just into Vietnam but also Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. US development and medical specialists, social scientists, military advisors, Christian missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, and more besides entered the region as (willing or unwitting) contributors, or determined impediments, to the United States' attempts to win Southeast Asia to its side of the Cold War divide.[22] Even stubbornly nonaligned Burma remained in a testy relationship with the United States based on US military and economic aid to the Burmese government.[23] This is not to mention how US relations with Malaya and Singapore grew increasingly intimate in this period. In short, elite

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[21] Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War,* 29.

[22] Edward G. Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Bradley Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and US-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippines Relations, 1942-1960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[23] Kenton Clymer, *A Delicate Relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

and non-elite Americans alike were deeply invested and involved in Southeast Asia, many of them at that. Moreover, as Sangjoon Lee demonstrates, the US government ploughed monies and man hours into nurturing East and Southeast Asian cinema industries during the Cold War, cultivating West-friendly, anticommunist cultural production indigenous to Asia that could colour local worldviews in favour of Washington.[24] Given all these, scholars must broaden the survey of US Cold War films concerned with 1960s Southeast Asia, not least to avoid returning unerringly to *The Green Berets* (1968), the "only major direct-combat portrayal" of the Vietnam conflict produced while the US forces warred in Indochina, about which most have agreed that the film was critically panned, jingoistic, ultra-violent, and starred John Wayne.[25]

The 7th Dawn **and an American Vision of Cold War Victory in Southeast Asia**

The 7th Dawn was released in September 1964, a month following the fateful Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorised President Lyndon Johnson to Americanise the Vietnam conflict. In the context of the United States' deepening involvement in Vietnam, it does not take much to see that when the film's protagonist, an ex-US Army officer named Ferris, ultimately overcomes his communist foe in the Malayan jungles, the film awkwardly forecasts and hopes for US success in yet another Southeast Asian jungle to the north. Indeed, the film makes plain that Ferris, played by William Holden, is a formidable jungle warfare expert who, during the Second World War, fought alongside the local Malayan resistance movement

[24] Sangjoon Lee, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

[25] Shaw and Youngblood, *Cinematic Cold War,* 202; Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War,* 200-201; Paul Rich, *Cinema and Unconventional Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Insurgency, Terrorism and Special Operations* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2018), 45-47.

against Japanese occupying forces. (Of course, no US military officer was ever in this situation, which makes this fantasy worth further scrutiny.) When that local Malayan resistance movement evolves by the late 1940s into the guerrilla army of the MCP, the film depicts British authorities seeking Ferris's assistance to flush out his friend and former comrade-in-arms, Colonel Ng, commander of the MCP fighters. Unlike Ferris, the Ng character is based on the actual MCP leader, Chin Peng, who Britain had first honoured at the end of World War Two for his anti-Japanese efforts, only to later designate him an enemy of the state for launching the MCP's anti-British revolt in 1948 [when?].

To be sure, *The 7th Dawn* has not completely eluded the notice of scholars, owing mostly to the presence of guerrilla warfare in its plot. Paul Rich's study of cinematic portrayals of unconventional warfare (including counterinsurgency, terrorism, jungle and guerrilla tactics) makes a passing reference to the movie, criticising its "thin narrative" and, above all, the disappointingly limited screen-time it supposedly dedicates to Britain's counterinsurgency strategies and the wider conflict in Malaya.[26] Yet, how much of *The 7th Dawn* features jungle warfare seems to be entirely a matter of opinion. At the time of the film's release in 1964, *The New York Times* complained that the movie contained "a lot of creeping about in the jungles and exploding of dynamite" and so "many episodes of burnings and shootings and jungle crawlings (sic)." However, the *Times* did, like Rich, make sure to emphasise that Holden's star was conspicuously on the wane.[27]

Then again, because Rich's particular focus is the filmic portrayal of unconventional warfare, and the *Times'* critic inordinately fixated with Holden looking "plumper and more cynical," both miss much of what *The 7th Dawn* signals about American views of Southeast

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[26] Rich, *Cinema and Unconventional Warfare*, 87-89.

[27] Bosley Crowther, "Return to Far East Just Isn't the Same," *New York Times*, September 3, 1964.

Asia in the early 1960s.[28] The film's omission of the finer details of Ferris's or Britain's counterinsurgency tactics against the MCP is less critical than its transparent efforts to reimagine Britain's reversal of the domino theory in Malaya as an American achievement. Indeed, the domino logic of Southeast Asia's "interconnected insecurity," central to US policy toward the region during the Cold War, is discernible in the film's depiction of Britain's struggles against the MCP.[29] The film shows the British military overwhelmed by the MCP's manoeuvres and desperately seeking Ferris's support. As a montage of newspaper headlines and scenes of violent MCP machine-gun and grenade attacks underscore, the Malayan communists by 1953 have wreaked havoc in the country, assassinating numerous British colonial officials and rubber planters, striking at will and then disappearing into the thick Malayan jungle. In essence, 1950s Malaya is an unstable, teetering domino within the wider Cold War context. And Ng, the revered leader of the MCP (one of his followers even calls him "a god"), is explicit about this view of the world. He confidently declares to Ferris in one encounter that his fight against British forces "is not a local war in Malaya. It is sweeping all Asia. It will sweep Africa, South America, the world." If a tad graceless in execution, *The 7th Dawn* nevertheless clearly foregrounds the interconnected fates of Malaya, wider Asia, and the global South. Defeating the MCP in Malaya, the film implies, can break the chain reaction that Ng anticipates so eagerly. Therefore, British authorities must penetrate the Malayan jungles that have effectively concealed the MCP's bases; they must acquire the help of Ferris, who knows Ng's guerrilla strategies and can locate the MCP's headquarters. True, the historical reality is that British, Commonwealth and Malayan forces never needed US counterinsurgency knowledge to decimate the MCP. However, it is through the fiction of Ferris's jungle warfare expertise that *The 7th Dawn* envisions and performs the possibility that US forces entering

[28] Crowther, "Return to Far East Just Isn't the Same."

[29] Ngoei, "Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment," 217.

Vietnam in the months after the film's release might appropriate and/or supersede Britain's experiences in Malaya.

As such, the film dwells heavily on Ferris's familiarity with the Malayan jungle. Though dwarfed by gigantic trees that tower far above him and swallowed by the massive rainforest, he easily locates Ng's headquarters. Ferris accomplishes this twice in the film, once in order to persuade Ng to end the "bloody war" so that Malaya can stabilise sufficiently for Britain to grant it independence; a second time to rescue Candace, the daughter of the British High Commissioner, whom Ng has taken hostage and plans to kill. In contrast, the British military only discovers Ng's base by accident toward the close of the movie.

However, the film's optimistic vision of Ferris's capabilities—and by extension, its fantasy about America's prospects in Cold War Southeast Asia—is not free of the grim outlook inhered within Eisenhower's "falling domino principle." Despite Ferris's impressive jungle expertise, he fails to achieve many of his goals. He never manages to convince Ng to "put a muzzle on the dragon"—an obvious gesture at the perceived threat of China and the mostly Chinese MCP—and bring the armed revolt to an end. Instead, Ng mocks Ferris's efforts and indicates that their long friendship is over. And although Ferris does rescue Candace, he strains to get her out of the jungle. A powerful rainstorm destroys the routes that Ferris knows best. He struggles to break new paths through dense walls of leaves and, for some time, wanders lost (with Candace in tow), pursued by communist troops as well as fighting off Ng. When British troops at last stumble across Ng's headquarters, it is their superior firepower and numbers, not Ferris's knowledge of the jungle and guerrilla warfare, that annihilates the communist forces.

Additionally, Ferris fails to bring Candace back to her father, the High Commissioner, within the seven days that he has been given to do so. Here, then, is the plot point from which the film derives its name. In a nutshell, Ng had both kidnapped Candace and framed Ferris's lover, a woman named Dhana, as a communist collaborator. British authorities, eager for any

minor win against the MCP, detain the innocent Dhana and make plans to execute her, though Ferris manages to talk them into granting him time—just a week—to rescue and return Candace to her father in exchange for Dhana's life. At dawn on the seventh day, with Ferris and Candace nowhere in sight, Dhana goes to her death, the Prayer of St. Francis on her lips and the sun rising in her eyes.

Still, Ferris's record is not entirely that of failure. It is during his vigorous hand-to-hand combat with Ng that the MCP leader is finally killed. To be precise, though, Ng had actually gained the advantage in their fight and stood over Ferris with a raised machete when Candace unexpectedly intervenes and fatally shoots Ng in the back. Ferris's victory is as ham-fisted as it is awkwardly pure because he is innocent of Ng's death. As such, he has arguably (perhaps unbelievably) emerged from the jungle unsullied by the conflict. After all, his knowledge of the jungle has been deployed only for righteous purposes, to save Dhana, free Candace, and turn Ng from violence. Furthermore, he has, throughout the film, refused to become a weapon for Britain's violent counterinsurgency campaign, though his bid to rescue Candace certainly placed her in a prime position to kill Ng. In sum, Ferris's considerable talents, dismal failures, and ambiguous innocence in the routing of the MCP represents that dynamic mingling of hope, confidence and crisis at the core of American perceptions of Southeast Asia. For elite and middlebrow Americans, the region would have been viewed through the heartening, triumphant anticommunism of Britain in Malaya that also remained entangled with a fatalism born of the domino theory and Vietnam's ominous slide toward instability.

King Rat **and American Success in the Shadow of the Vietnam War**

In the thirteen months that separated the releases of *the 7th Dawn* and *King Rat*, US involvement in Southeast Asia would expand dramatically. The earlier film graced US silver screens in September 1964 when Washington had barely crossed the threshold of

Americanising the Vietnam conflict. By the time *King Rat* hit US theatres in October of the next year, American forces had already been deployed by the tens of thousands to seize the reins of the war effort in South Vietnam while Operation Rolling Thunder, the bombing campaign directed at North Vietnam, had been underway for months. Of course, it was a coincidence that *King Rat's* narrative placed US soldiers in a prisoner-of-war camp in Japanese-occupied Singapore in 1945, conditions that gestured vaguely at the imagined horrors of American troops trapped in a new Southeast Asian war. Nevertheless, since the America that greeted *King Rat* was at least knee-deep in the so-called Vietnam quagmire and wading further in, the film resonated with whatever inchoate dread of war then stirring within US society.

King Rat's setting is notable for another important reason. Britain's humiliating surrender of Singapore to Japan in World War Two had fundamentally shattered the myth of all white empires' invincibility. Worse, this denouement had come after British leaders' repeated boasts that Singapore's military facilities made the island an "impregnable fortress." When Singapore capitulated to Japan after just a week of fighting, Prime Minister Winston Churchill bemoaned what he called the "darkest moment" of the war. But the loss of Singapore was not only Britain's concern—it also filled the front pages of US broadsheets. For months ahead of the Singapore debacle, the American press, citing US military planners, had described the island as the "keystone" of not only "all Allied plans for the Pacific War," but also "the strategic arch of the democracies of the Far East" as well as "the defense structure of the United Nations in the Southwestern Pacific."[30] Since US leaders and journalists had lately witnessed Vichy-ruled Indochina and Siam acquiesce to Japan, and Japanese forces fully seize Malaya, they believed that British imperial forces in Singapore would at last halt Japan's rapid southward advance. In effect, mainland Southeast Asia already resembled a row of dominoes in a vision where Singapore must be the one to stand firm. Such hype and hope turned Singapore into the

[30] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 20.

symbol of the western powers' interconnected fates in Southeast and East Asia. In Anglo-American memories, then, the shock of Singapore's fall after the loss of mainland Southeast Asia, followed swiftly by Japan's victories in the Dutch East Indies and the US-ruled Philippines, birthed a rudimentary domino logic well before Eisenhower gave it a name.[31] In essence, *King Rat* takes place in a fallen domino, speaking profoundly to Americans' fears about their nation's involvement in Cold War Southeast Asia.

Yet the film was released at a time when Southeast Asia had also begun tilting decisively toward the United States. Despite Vietnam's instability, contemporaneous developments in Malaya and Singapore had already contributed to a broader pattern of reversing the pessimistic domino logic across the region. Indeed, US policymakers perceived that the creation of Malaysia in 1963—the merging of west-friendly Malaya, Singapore and the British territories of Sabah and Sarawak—was a vital link that completed a "wide anti-communist arc" in the region. The new Malaysian federation connected pro-US Thailand on mainland Southeast Asia to the islands of America's longtime ally, the Philippines, encircling not only the South China Sea but also Vietnam and China. Moreover, the continuous corridor of US-friendly countries running north from Singapore to Malaya and Thailand resembled a strategic beachhead for the United States, pointed directly at Vietnam. Outside of Washington's decision-making circles, the US press, too, was enthused by the rise of Malaysia, anticipating that the federation would bring a "stabilizing influence" to the region and serve as a "1,600-mile" long "bulwark against communism"[32] In this light, *King Rat's* story of an American POW thriving amidst emaciated and suffering British prisoners, performs the contradictory currents of

[31] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment*, 18-21.

[32] Ngoei, *Arc of Containment,* chapter 4.

this period—the entangled strains of promise and peril—in the American imagination of how their nation might fare in the struggle for wider Southeast Asia.

The film's protagonist, an American, is the lowly Corporal King, who instead of simply surviving in the POW camp, enriches himself through the profitable buying and reselling of several officers' prized possessions. Described as a "genius" several times during the film, the corporal manages to procure fresh eggs, cigarettes and wads of Japanese currency, resources he uses to draw favours from highly ranked British officers and wind his American compatriots around his finger. Those prisoners, especially reliant on him for more rations or his ability to make deals with the Japanese soldiers, perform all the tasks he asks of them: someone does his laundry, someone fixes a hotplate for him and makes his coffee, a whole team of prisoners assist his scheme to breed rats and sell them to British officers in the camp as the Malayan delicacy of "mouse-deer meat."

The corporal is so dominant that all in the camp called him "the King." His towering presence is established in the film's opening scenes, with his striking appearance and how others watch him. The King is the only one wearing a neatly starched uniform while British colonels putter around the camp in rags, many bare-bodied but for tattered towels around their waists; he is the only one wearing shiny boots while others have makeshift sandals or hobble barefoot, the only one who appears healthy and well-nourished while others, skin and bone, stand in long lines for soup made from a single catfish. Some minutes after his entrance, the King enjoys a fried egg (while the American internees around him salivate), a scene juxtaposed against that of British officers catching cockroaches from the camp's human waste borehole in order to get their protein. In this Japanese-dominated (and formerly) British space, the American scores an emphatic personal triumph, accomplishing much more for himself than the British that he lives among.

That said, the pessimism of the domino theory is not absent from *King Rat*. In a moment of rare vulnerability, the King shares with British officer, Peter Marlowe, that should the Allies win the war, Japanese troops will massacre everyone in the camp. He explains that all his wheeling and dealing has been to accumulate enough Japanese currency to buy his life when the war ends. For all he has achieved, he remains convinced that he is in grave danger, that forces far beyond his control, beyond Singapore, can destroy him utterly. Thus, when the Japanese officers announce to the POWs their surrender late in the film, the war's end brings only a cloud of depression upon the King even though the Japanese soldiers do not kill any of the prisoners. When a lone British paratrooper arrives to liberate the camp, he turns the King's success, the fact that he is "dressed properly while they [the officers] are all in rags," into a menacing accusation that the King has committed some crime. In a sinister tone, the paratrooper warns the King: "I won't forget you, corporal, and I will speak to [your senior officer] at the earliest opportunity," crushing all the influence the King had ever enjoyed. At the close of the film, the King is reminded once again that he is a mere corporal, ordered by a newly arrived sergeant to board an American truck that is about to leave the camp. He is soon swallowed up by a group of liberated soldiers who are milling around and clearly overjoyed that the war is over. It becomes increasingly difficult for a viewer to distinguish him from the crowd—the King has lost his crown.

King Rat then concludes on another discomfiting note. As the military transport, Corporal King is on vanishes into the dust and distance, it becomes clear that his success was won not merely by the exploitation of others. King's accomplishments were made possible by the war itself. The desperation and demoralisation of the POWs, their isolation from the outside world and the very fact of their capture—evidence of defeat and surrender—combined to produce the fertile environment in which the King's schemes flourished. His most dynamic moment was during the war, a time of suffering. With this, the film offers a troubling perspective on the United States' presence in Southeast Asia, in the throes of the Cold War,

amidst a flagging colonial order: American success comes from the suffering of others (including Americans); it will be secured in unsavoury and exploitative ways; it will emerge and always remain insecure, teetering like a domino, ever upright and yet in danger of collapse.

Conclusion

Eisenhower's "falling domino principle" was never only about Vietnam. It had always concerned the larger context of Southeast Asia in the Cold War, above all, a presumed interconnectedness of the region. Thus, Vietnam's deteriorating situation in the 1960s did not monopolise the imaginations of US policy and culture makers. Developments in other countries in the region, such as the reversals of the domino theory in Malaya and Singapore, also flashed brightly on the radars of US policymakers and found their way onto American silver screens. Films such as *The 7th Dawn* and *King Rat,* to which scholars of cinema have paid little attention, performed the fitful dynamics of the conflicted US mind with respect to America's Cold War goals and their prospects in Southeast Asia. These films were not simply forerunners of the despondent and vicious Vietnam War revenge fantasies that Hollywood cranked out following America's retreat from Indochina, nor boosters of the US military effort in Vietnam like *The Green Berets,* which sounded hollow acclamations of the righteousness of America's cause. In depicting Americans achieving a measure of uneasy and vexed success in 1950s Malaya and Japanese-occupied Singapore, *The 7th Dawn* and *King Rat* grappled tenaciously with optimism about Southeast Asia's anticommunist trajectory while buffeted by an abiding distress, a fear that the domino theory might still run its dreaded course. Analysing how these films gestured at the complexities of US attitudes toward Cold War Southeast Asia is not valuable merely because it reveals that Americans were concerned with, and their ideas

shaped by, some other domino besides Vietnam. This is not a case in which Southeast Asian state was more or less critical to Americans within and beyond elite decision-making circles. Rather, this inquiry recovers the vision of interconnectedness at the heart of US approaches to the wider Southeast Asian region, the principle that the fate of one or several dominoes must always impinge on others. It is in adopting this wider, regional view that we may also begin to venture deeper into studying the complicated and troubled American Cold War encounter with Southeast Asia.

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