

Dangerous Moments: An Oral History of the May 1969 Riots in Kuala Lumpur

by

Stanley Leng Hon Chia

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled:

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submitted by Stanley Leng Hon Chia in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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in History

Examining Committee:

John Roosa, Associate Professor and Acting Head, Department of History, UBC

Supervisor

John Christopoulos, Associate Professor, Department of History, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Henry Yu, Associate Professor, Department of History, UBC

Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

This study foregrounds the experiences of urban Malaysians during the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. Based on oral life history interviews, it takes a microhistory approach to argue that Malaysians cooperated with each other across lines of race, class, and religion at life-threatening moments, even though the violence was primarily one between members of different races. The study differs from previous scholarly work, most of which have taken a top-down approach to the riots and builds on more recent scholarly work. There are two primary sites of inquiry: neighbourhoods and cinemas in Kuala Lumpur, and the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital. Accounts shared by Malaysian cinemagoers who were stuck at theatres demonstrate how quickly racial identification was done by rioters to decide between friends and foes. On a neighbourhood level, Malaysians provided refuge to their neighbours even if they were of different class or religion. Narratives by hospital workers and volunteers problematize our understanding of the violence's scale, temporality, and spatiality. They also help us see how Malaysians helped each other across racial lines, as well as the varied enforcement of the state of emergency promulgated following the riots. Understanding the riots from the perspective of these particular Malaysian interviewees not only allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of what happened during the riots, but also permits us to hear the voices of riot victims, some of whom were speaking about their experience for the first time.

Lay Summary

This paper is about Malaysians who experienced the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. The violence was mostly between ethnic Malays and non-ethnic Malays. After interviewing several Malaysians, their stories confirmed the high number of deaths and injury. At the same time, a theme I noticed in their stories was that there were also cases of cooperation between ethnic Malays and non-ethnic Malays, the haves and have-nots, and those who believed in different religions. Kuala Lumpur cinemas, specific neighbourhoods, and the General Hospital are the primary locations this project focuses on. This paper changes our perception of the riots and allows us to hear from those affected by the riots for the first time.

Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Leng Hon Stanley Chia. All research was conducted in compliance with the Behavioural Ethics Review Board at the University of British Columbia. Certificate Number H19-01098. All of the oral history interviews done for this project were conducted between June and August 2019 in Kuala Lumpur. The significance of the timing for these interviews cannot be understated for there were at least two overarching themes to keep in mind when reading the narratives shared by each interviewee. Firstly, the *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope) coalition was in government during that time. This 19-month government in Malaysia can be characterized as liberal when compared with the *Barisan Nasional* (National Front) coalition government, which had ruled Malaysia since *Merdeka* (independence) in 1957 to May 2018. For example, the *Pakatan Harapan* government made some concrete progress in human rights.¹ Legislation on “processions, marches and other forms of peaceful demonstration” was relaxed and public protests were mostly tolerated.² The government addressed corruption by improving the independence of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and prosecuting former Prime Minister Najib Razak over the 1MDB financial scandal.

Secondly, all of the oral history interviews occurred after the nationwide commemoration of the riot’s fiftieth anniversary. This meant that my interviewees, as avid consumers of print and in some cases, digital newspapers, were subtly reminded of their individual May 1969

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/4/malaysias-new-prime-minister-delays-parliament-by-two-months>

² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa01/1354/2020/en/>

experiences, as various newspaper companies published stories and news reports about the riots throughout May 2019. The nationwide commemoration led to the creation of an oral history-gathering exercise through news platforms such as *MalaysiaKini*, *The Star*, and the *New Straits Times*. Two of my interviewees had their stories featured there. More importantly, newspapers served as visual cues for my interviewees to remember their past. When chatting with me, most of my interviewees brought up what they had recently read in the newspapers.

The perception of a more liberal climate in Malaysia and the commemoration of the riots may have strongly encouraged my interviewees to speak relatively freely about their riot experiences. Had the interviews been done a year earlier, I think many of my interviewees would not have shared as much about their past experiences as they did. With this context in mind, I invite you now to turn to my study.

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Donald Horowitz and Tunku Zain Al-Abidin gave me good ideas. Elvin Ong, Lee Lui Xia, Nila Ayu Utami, Edgar Liao, and Teilhard Paradela, thanks for the conversations. I am very grateful to Charlie and Jo Hirschman for driving me to Seattle, hosting me at their home for a week, letting me interview them, and accessing their collection of private letters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Francis Chong found it difficult to sleep on the night of May 13, 1969. A few hours earlier, he had just gotten off school and was helping his father sell iced soya bean milk to cinemagoers in front of the Pavilion cinema hall in downtown Kuala Lumpur. Around six o'clock, two taxi drivers stopped by their roadside stall and suggested they close up and return home. Chong remembers

I asking “what’s the problem?” They telling me the, the problem, fighting, happening in this uh, this uh... Kampung Baru, and Chow Kit Road. So... so, quickly my father will pack up the thing and we, we push the store, push the, cart back to our house in Pudu, ‘cause we staying in Pudu, beside the Majestic cinema. So... at night time go, so we heard a lot of news coming lah, and a lot of people were panicking... so all starting to, starting to... prepare, you know, prepare all the weapon, if got any problem... Even there is a meeting, I don’t know whether they are... gangster head or what, I was too small that time, I was I think I was Form 2... 1969 that time.³ So we, whole night, cannot sleep-lah, a lot of our, you know they start, I think there’s a lot of rumour-lah, not, not, not true... news coming, 2-3 hours we heard, people, *giving warning*-lah, say here got fire there got fire but actually nothing happen. The whole night was quite, you know, very, what do you call it, very *kelam-kabut*.⁴

Fortunately, Chong’s Pudu neighbourhood was “quite peaceful.” Even so, his father prepared a steel pipe “in case they come, we just have to fight it out-lah.” The “they” that Chong’s father was referring to were likely the ethnic Malays living in Kampung Baru, who the taxi drivers mentioned were behind the problem. Although nothing bad had happened that night, the next morning Chong witnessed street violence committed by Malaysian army officials.

Chong: That time my house is situated along the main road, Jalan Pudu, next to the Majestic cinema. So overnight a lot of those people are, those uh, cinemagoers stranded in the cinema. So the next morning, a lot of them come out, looking for food, but then around, around 10 something, 10 am, we saw this uh... army truck-ah, moving, coming,

³ Form 2 in Malaysia roughly corresponds to grade 8, making Francis Chong 14 years old at the time.

⁴ Interview with Francis Chong at Oriental Pearl Restaurant, Bukit Jalil Golf and Country Resort on July 13, 2019. Pavilion cinema and Majestic cinema are no longer open today and have since been replaced by parking lots. *Kelam-kabut* can be translated to mean chaotic or hectic in Malay.

you know, so they start shooting. Shooting... whatever, along their path they start shooting, so... actually I saw one or two guy, just uh, got shot, in front of my house.

Me: Oh no!

Chong: So after that, uh... the whole day, after the shooting, nobody dare to go out again. So the next night we shift in to... inner part of uh, Pudu-lah, because we feel that it's not safe around the main road, so we go to a friend's place, inside, further in-lah.⁵

Chong's narrative above is one of many stories I collected as part of my research into the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur, which was largely between the ethnic Malay majority in Malaysia and non-ethnic Malays (ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians). Chong's narrative demonstrates several things: how *kelam-kabut* everything was during the riots, the ways in which Malaysians prepared for violence, and how Malaysians escaped and attempted to escape violence.

Malaysians were caught at the wrong place at the wrong time; some were stuck in cinemas, some were coerced to join self-defence neighbourhood groups, and some worked overtime and around the clock in hospitals to save injured Malaysians. But how did this all happen?

On May 10, 1969, Malaysia held its third general election. Composed of UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress), the Alliance⁶ went into the polls expecting Malaysians to not only return them to power, but with the two-thirds majority they had enjoyed since Malaysia's independence in 1957. However, three major political parties outside of the Alliance, the DAP (Democratic Action Party), Gerakan (Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia), and PPP (People's Progressive Party) agreed to an electoral pact whereby they would not compete for the same seats.⁷ In addition to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The Alliance became known as *Barisan Nasional* or the National Front in 1974.

⁷ R. K. Vasil, *The Malaysian General Election of 1969*, Oxford in Asia Current Affairs (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972), 21.

that, PMIP (the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party, known as PAS today) contested for seats traditionally held by UMNO.

As a result of the Opposition's efforts, the Alliance maintained its hold in parliament, but lost its two-thirds majority. At the Selangor state level, the legislative assembly was in limbo. UMNO was not able to form the state government, as it had won 14 state seats while DAP, Gerakan and an independent had also won 14 state seats.⁸ In 1969, Kuala Lumpur was both the state capital for Selangor and the federal capital of Malaysia.⁹ It also served as the center of most political parties in the country. As such, the prospect of an Opposition-led Selangor government caused anxiety among the UMNO rank-and-file.¹⁰ Members of DAP and Gerakan, who were mostly ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indian, were jubilant with the electoral results and took to the streets to celebrate their electoral gains on May 11 and 12. According to the Prime Minister of Malaysia (1957-1970) Tunku Abdul Rahman's memoirs and a Malaysian government report, members of DAP and Gerakan provoked the ethnic Malay community in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur by shouting phrases such as, "Malays Dead," "No Power," "Better go and die," "This country does not belong to the Malays, we want to chase out all Malays," "Now we rule, what can you do about it," "What can the Malays do?," "The Malays can go back and become *sakai*."¹¹ The official story about the cause of the riot claims that these utterances made many

⁸ Kee Beng Ooi, *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr. Ismail and His Time* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), 187.

⁹ Kuala Lumpur became a federal territory of Malaysia in 1974.

¹⁰ Felix Gagliano, *Communal Violence in Malaysia 1969: The Political Aftermath* (Ohio University: Center for International Studies, 1970), 16.

¹¹ Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13; Before and After* (Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press, 1969), 78 and National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy: a Report* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969), 32, 33, and 38. All of the phrases (except the last two) were translated from the original Malay either by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the National Operations Council or me. The original phrases in Malay were "Melayu Mati," "Tidak Kuasa," "Pergi mati-lah," "Ini negeri bukan Melayu punya, kita mahu halau semua Melayu," "Sekarang kita perentah apa boleh buat," "Melayu boleh balek kampung". The last two Malay phrases which I translated to English were "Apa Melayu boleh buat,"

ethnic Malays in Kuala Lumpur unhappy and angry.¹² The next day, the Tuesday evening of May 13, riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur, starting from Kampung Baru. The riots resulted in the highest number of casualties Malaysia has faced since 1945, according to the late Malaysian historian Boon Kheng Cheah.¹³

There is no agreement on the exact cause of the riots. The official story may not be accurate. The government has pinned the blame on the Chinese community, particularly Chinese Communists, for antagonizing the ethnic Malays in Kampung Baru, Selangor.¹⁴ On the other hand, the journalist and former Malayan policeman John Slimming holds Dato' Harun Idris, Chief Minister of Selangor, and other local UMNO officials as responsible for "encouraging and organizing the UMNO demonstration which started the race riots."¹⁵ Public intellectual Kua Kia Soong argues that the riot was a product of a power struggle within the ruling UMNO party; the May 13 incident was a "coup d'état by the then emergent Malay state-capitalist class, led by Abdul Razak Hussein, to depose... Tunku Abdul Rahman."¹⁶ Pro-government viewpoints on the cause of the riots have been challenged by anti-government viewpoints, as Donald Horowitz has pointed it out in his comparative analysis of ethnic riots around the world.¹⁷ However, this study finds Horowitz's characterization of the riots as anti-Chinese to be partly inaccurate; there were cases of cooperation between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malays to save each other from

and "Melayu boleh balek jadi sakai". Note that calling an ethnic Malay a "sakai" is derogatory as the term refers to an indigenous person living in Malaysia. On why "sakai" is derogatory, see Sandra Khor Manickam, "Situating Thinking or How the Science of Race was Socialised in British Malaya," *The Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 3 (September 2012): 283-307.

¹² National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*, 40 and 44.

¹³ Boon Kheng Cheah, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-1946*, 2nd ed (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1987), xv and xvi.

¹⁴ Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13*, 181, 191-192 and National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*.

¹⁵ John Slimming, *Malaysia: Death of a Democracy* (London: J. Murray, 1969), 25.

¹⁶ Kia Soong Kua, "Racial Conflict in Malaysia: against the official history" *Race & Class* 49, no. 3 (2007): 34-35.

¹⁷ Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 282.

violence. In speaking of the riot as a case of communal violence between the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Malays, one must realize that not all members of these ethnic groups supported the violence and that many worked to limit it.

Over the course of the week-long racial riot in KL (as Kuala Lumpur is known), 196 people were killed, and 439 people were injured, according to the official reports.¹⁸ Some would see that as a modest number. Foreign diplomats and journalists estimate that at least 800 people died, and thousands were injured.¹⁹ No matter which set of numbers one uses, it is clear that a majority of those killed or injured were ethnic Chinese Malaysians. A British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) note puts the proportion of ethnic Chinese to ethnic Malay casualties as high as 6 to 1.²⁰ What is perhaps even more shocking is that many of the ethnic Chinese who were killed were buried in a government-built “mass grave” near the Sungai Buloh leprosarium, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

At the time of this writing, the Ministry of Home Affairs has yet to declassify documents about the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. During the fiftieth-year commemorations of the riots in 2019, there were calls for the ministry to declassify documents and set-up a truth and reconciliation commission. However, those petitions fell on deaf ears and the government refused to act. The few archival fragments that scholars can view at Arkib Negara²¹ do not come close to answering several basic questions about the riots, such as, “Who or what sparked the riots?” “Who should be held responsible for the riots?” “Why did some neighbourhoods

¹⁸ National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*, 88-90.

¹⁹ John Slimming, *Malaysia: The Death of a Democracy* (London: J. Murray, 1969), 47 and see MalaysiaKini’s death count section on the website, *May 13: Never Again* (2019) <https://pages.malaysiakini.com/may13/en/>.

²⁰ Foreign and Commonwealth telegram no. 504 of 17 May 1969, quoted in Kua, “Racial Conflict in Malaysia,” 43.

²¹ Arkib Negara means the National Archives in Malay. It is located in Kuala Lumpur.

experience more violence than others?” and “Why did some neighborhoods have stricter curfews than other neighbourhoods?”

Given the lack of official documents, recent scholars have pivoted away from writing top-down accounts of the riots like those written by Horowitz and Kua. For example, scholars like Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, Heong Hong Por, and Ying Xin Show have used oral history interviews and novels in their writings about the riots. Abdul Rahman Ibrahim draws predominantly on ethnic Malay interviewees to argue that the riots were a result of years of tension between the different races in Malaysia.²² Por uses a site-specific approach, the Sungai Buloh leprosarium mass burial site, to “call official state narratives [about the riots] into question.” In particular, she draws on interviews conducted with family members of the 1969 riot victims as they paid their respects during the tomb-sweeping season to make connections between the location of the mass burial site, management of bodies by the state, and reclamation of the dead by family members.²³ Show draws on recent fiction written by women of the three major races in Malaysia to demonstrate the way in which these writers challenge the prevailing male-dominated, racialized narrative in two different ways. On one hand, these Malaysian women use gender and female protagonists to problematize Malaysia’s race-based development, language politics, struggle between classes, and the suppression of hurt feelings. On the other hand, they allow readers to imagine and articulate a new post-1969 identity.²⁴

²² Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, *13 Mei 1969 di Kuala Lumpur* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2011).

²³ Heong Hong Por, “Family Narratives and Abandoned Monuments of the May 13 Riot in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 90, no. 2 (2017): 35–54.

²⁴ Ying Xin Show, “Narrating the Racial Riots of 13 May 1969: Gender and Postmemory in Malaysian Literature,” *South East Asia Research* (2021): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2021.1914515>.

Building on these three works, my essay employs a microhistory approach to argue that Malaysians helped each other across lines of race, class, and religion during the riots. I do so primarily by using 28 oral life history interviews conducted by me. I also use a handful of oral history interviews conducted by Malaysian scholars and journalists, a number of private letters, and several works of fiction by writers who grew up in Malaysia. I contend that Malaysians helping each other at a time of violence is significant because the prevailing idea is that during the riots, many ethnic Malays harmed ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians, and vice versa.²⁵ Stories of cooperation during the riots have been rare and have yet to be heard by scholars of Southeast Asian history. It is my belief that such narratives can illuminate a different aspect of the riots, hence decenter the violence and focus instead on the goodwill and friendships between Malaysians at those dangerous moments.

Instead of focusing on the ‘big picture’ story about the riots in terms of national politics, this study works at a much-reduced scale. The spatial focus is on specific cinemas in Kuala Lumpur, the Bukit Bintang and Kampung Baru neighbourhoods, and the General Hospital. I discuss the riots from the perspective of Malaysians who experienced the violence first hand. My approach is a case of what can be called microhistory. Carlo Ginzburg, from the Italian school of microhistory, suggests that microhistory can be understood using a vegetal metaphor, where microhistorians “busy themselves only with the leaves” in contrast to past historians who were preoccupied with the “trunk of a tree or its branch.”²⁶ Having read several examples of microhistory, I understand scholarly works that take a microhistory approach to mean the

²⁵ National Operations Council, *May 13 Tragedy*, 25-80.

²⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 10–35, particularly pages 23 and 31.

reduction of the scale of observation and analysis, where a footnote in a non-microhistorian's work is transformed into a book for a practicing microhistorian.²⁷ By taking a microhistory approach to the riots, a more nuanced understanding of the riots emerges. While a "macro" study of the riots may highlight how the tense situation between the ethnic Malays and the non-ethnic Malays in Malaysia, a microhistory study like mine allows for stories of cooperation across lines of race, class, and religion to emerge and problematize the conventional understanding of the violence. There are several works that employ microhistory as a methodology when looking at violence between neighbours and members of different racial or religious communities.²⁸ However, no other work has used microhistory to examine the May 1969 riots of Kuala Lumpur. This is perhaps due to limited scholarly interest in documenting and examining the experiences of non-elite Malaysians who experienced the riots.

In chapter 2, I explore how Malaysians escaped and protected themselves and their local communities from violence. I do so by demonstrating how some people fled the violence as rioters struggled to differentiate these would-be victims between friend or foe. Furthermore, I draw on several examples to show how the haves came to care for the have-nots at this exceptional time. I also discuss the formation of neighborhood-level self-defence militias.

²⁷ Ibid, 22.

²⁸ For examples, see Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, Neighbors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Joshua Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria, Lethal Provocation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019); Max Bergholz, "To Kill or Not to Kill? The Challenge of Restraining Violence in a Balkan Community," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, no. 4 (October 2019): 954–85; Layli Uddin, "'Enemy Agents at Work': A Microhistory of the 1954 Adamjee and Karnaphuli Riots in East Pakistan," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 2 (March 2021): 629–64; Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Holocaust, War and Genocide*, volume 24 (New York: Berghahn, 2017); and Carolyn J. Dean, *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide, The Moral Witness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019).

I situate chapter 3 around the General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur to demonstrate how hospital workers and volunteers mobilized to help the injured. My study differs from previous scholarship on the riots as I center the health-care workers as people who remained neutral in the violence and cared to the victims. By doing so, I demonstrate a different aspect of the riots, one that sees the riots from the perspective of the healers of violence.

Taken together, chapters 2 and 3 highlight stories of cooperation between Malaysians, particularly those across racial, class, and religious lines. These stories of cooperation are important because it problematizes the racial nature of the riots: if it was simply an anti-Chinese riot, for example, why then did ethnic Chinese doctors attend to injured ethnic Malay patients at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital? Similarly, why would ethnic Malay gas station workers allow escaping ethnic Chinese cinemagoers to take refuge behind a gas station?²⁹ These narratives show how meaningful relationships between friends, colleagues, and neighbours were at times stronger than the racial antagonism being promoted by politicians who espoused beliefs based on the supposed superiority or advantages of one's race. In my conclusion, I point to future directions and reflect on the significance of researching the May 1969 riots after more than fifty years have passed.

²⁹ Heong Hong Por, *Zai Shangkou Shang Chongsheng: Wuyisan Shijian Geren Koushu Xushi [Reborn on the Wound: Personal Oral Narratives of the May 13 Incident]*, edited by May 13 Incident Oral History Group. (Petaling Jaya: Gerakbudaya, 2020), 86.

Chapter 2: Escaping Danger: Malaysians in Motion During a State of Emergency

Aiman Abidin left his office desk at half past six in the evening on Tuesday, May 13, to observe an ethnic Malay solidarity counter rally in central Kuala Lumpur. A day before, he claims to have seen male supporters of Gerakan and DAP insulting ethnic Malays with racial slurs around Kampung Baru during an electoral victory parade.³⁰ As a politically aware ethnic Malay in his mid-twenties, Aiman claims that he wanted to simply observe the rally at the Selangor Menteri Besar's residence in Kampung Baru.³¹ Exactly three months before, Aiman had his graduate studies in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison cut short as the Malaysian government, which funded his studies, recalled him back home to work as a demographer in a government agency tasked with "educating poor Malays."³² While on the way to the state official's residence around seven in the evening, he almost lost his life, and not just once, but twice. In a private letter to a graduate school friend living in the United States, he wrote,

... by the time I got to Batu Road (Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) I found all shop houses were closed and both sides of the street were full of Chinese armed with all sorts of weapons. Only then I realised I was in danger but I was lucky enough, the crowd let me through probably thinking I was a Chinese. When I reached the end of Batu Road ie at the round-about (one road leading to Ipoh, another to Princess Road, and another to Pahang) I saw cars and scooters burning along Princess Road.³³ The first thought ~~that~~ to my mind was to go to Malay area and seek shelter. I turned into Pahang Road and

³⁰ Additionally, Kampung Baru and Kampong Bharu both refer to the same place in Kuala Lumpur. Similarly, Selangor Menteri Besar and Selangor Mentri Besar are alternative spellings that refers to the chief minister of the state of Selangor in Malay. The Menteri Besar of a state is like the Premier of a province in the Canadian context.

³¹ National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*, 40-55.

³² Aiman Abidin to Charles Hirschman, March 1st, 1969, and April 15th, 1969, Charles Hirschman private collection. To be more specific, Aiman Abidin worked in the research and planning section of Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), also known as the Council of the People's Trust. The description of MARA used is a direct quote from National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*, 33.

³³ Princes Road is misspelt as Princess Road in the original letter.

through the General Hospital into Circular Road with the idea of going to Kampong Bharu through the other end of Princess Road. I reached the other end of ~~Kampong Bharu~~ **Princess Road** there were a few more cars burning but I swerved my car nevertheless into Princess area. I was only gone about 40 yards and a big mob of Malays rushed toward my car armed with all sorts of weapons. I was nearly hacked by them but God probably wanted me to live to see another day. One of the mob recognized me (I have been trying to remember him ever since) – he saved me. They let me through and I turned into the Mentri Besar’s residency. I was stuck there until about 430am the next day.³⁴

Aiman’s letter offers us a window into how dangerous it was to be moving around Kuala Lumpur during the riots. His life was endangered by both ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malay mobs. The recipient of Aiman’s 1969 letter remembers how Aiman had fairer skin relative to typical ethnic Malays in Malaysia.³⁵ On one hand, Aiman’s skin colour explains why the ethnic Chinese mob on Batu Road let him pass through, as they probably assumed that he was a fellow ethnic Chinese. On the other hand, it nearly resulted in his death at the hands of “a big mob of Malays.” Fortunately for Aiman, a member of the mob recognized and saved him. Aiman’s encounter with both the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Malay mobs illustrate two characteristics about the riots: the dangers involved in moving around Kuala Lumpur, and how decisions about who to attack were made quickly and superficially on appearances.

Aiman’s story is an entry-point to examine how precarious life was for Malaysians moving around Kuala Lumpur during the sudden statewide 24-hour curfew and state of emergency in May 1969. The existing body of scholarly literature has rigorously documented the locations where violence took place.³⁶ However, it has yet to address the ways in which would-be victims of violence escaped and protected themselves from scenes of violence. By examining

³⁴ Aiman Abidin to Charles Hirschman, June 1st, 1969, Charles Hirschman private collection. All the strikethroughs, bolded text, and text in parentheses are in the original.

³⁵ Interview with Charles Hirschman at his house on September 6, 2019.

³⁶ For examples, see Tunku Abdul Rahman, *May 13 Before and After* and Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riots*.

Aiman's letter and several oral history narratives, I problematize the existing body of scholarship on the riots' violence in several ways. Firstly, I consider how one's skin colour mattered amidst the riots. When individuals such as Aiman Abidin encountered ethnic Chinese mobs, they were able to escape riot violence because of their skin colour. Secondly, I look at how would-be riot victims helped members of their local community find safety. Thirdly, I look at how individuals participated in the impromptu formation of "vigilante corps" or neighbourhood self-defence groups to protect themselves.

2.1 Skin Colour

The first time I met Kenneth Cheok and his wife, Jennifer Ooi was over non-halal dim sum³⁷ with my parents and some of their friends in a Chinese restaurant inside Bangsar Shopping Centre, a suburban shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur in 2019. When my mother told them I was researching the riots of May 1969, I was not expecting the two of them to share their experience of the incident. It was a pleasant meal; it was not the time to discuss painful memories. Perhaps the ethnic Chinese couple were willing to share their experience because they took comfort in the fact that they were surrounded by people they trusted and were seated in a private room. As the two of them spoke to my mother and me, concurrent conversations around the table died down as others listened in.

Given how rich and nuanced Kenneth Cheok and Jennifer Ooi's narration of their riot experience were, I approached them to ask if I could interview them in a quieter environment and ask further details about their narrative. They agreed, and the interview transcript I share

³⁷ In urban Malaysia, there is an option to have either halal or non-halal dim sum. Halal dim sum is Muslim-friendly.

below in the next paragraph emerged out of that second sharing of their experience. It is worth noting that when I spoke to them for a second time, the atmosphere was more “sterile” and less candid as the interview was conducted in an empty room in their bungalow house.

On May 13, the same day Aiman Abidin almost lost his life, the couple went to watch the first evening show at Federal Cinema in Kuala Lumpur. Federal Cinema and Capitol Cinema are the two closest cinemas to the General Hospital, located a kilometer southwest of the cinemas. At the time, the 25-year-olds stayed in the northern suburb of Jalan Pekeliling, which is half a kilometer north of the General Hospital. They chose to catch a movie on a Tuesday because Jennifer worked as a nurse at the General Hospital and happened to have a day off that day. As they took their seats in the theatre hall, they expected to have a good time watching the movie, “They Came to Rob Las Vegas.”³⁸ Halfway through the film, they heard a commotion outside, with the sound of metal bars being dragged on the road. Cheok initially ignored it, saying to his wife, “don’t worry-lah, it’s a gang fight. The police will come and that thing will end.” He thought that whatever was happening outside the cinema was a minor scuffle between members of two ethnic Chinese gangs that would be settled with the arrival of the police to break up the fight. However, that was not to be. Cheok remembers,

the noise got louder and louder, then we hear pounding, at the doors. and then we, they broke in the ground floor first, because we are upper floor, we could see, you know, sort of *shadows*, because the movie was still running, so of course the lights were very dim, but we could see... people running up and down. And then our upper floor burst open... then... they said to us in Chinese, [Cheok impersonates the person by speaking in a loud voice] “Look! [brief pause] If you value your life, get out now! Go across [Cheok says

³⁸ The couple does not remember the name of the movie they watched, but another Chinese Malaysian man who went to Federal Cinema to watch a movie at the same time remembers watching, “They Came to Rob Las Vegas”. See Heong Hong Por, “Fansi wuyisan shijian: Geti xushi, jiyi zhengzhi yu hejie de lunli” [Reflecting on May 13 Incident: Personal Narratives, Politics of Memory and the Ethics of Reconciliation].” *In Zai Shangkou Shang Chongsheng: Wuyisan Shijian Geren Koushu Xushi [Reborn on the Wound: Personal Oral Narratives of the May 13 Incident]*, edited by May 13 Incident Oral History Group. (Petaling Jaya: Gerakbudaya, 2020), 84-85.

while pointing his finger] to the coffee-shop there.” Then the next question, “Any Malays here?” [in a normal voice] Of course, we don’t know any Malays, [chuckles] we are just sitting watching the cinema. So we didn’t know what happen, so of course we just obeyed and did as told to us, and then we got out.³⁹

The couple were somewhat fortunate to have encountered ethnic Chinese gangsters, albeit in a rather violent scenario. Since the couple looked ethnic Chinese and could understand what the gangsters were telling them,⁴⁰ they were allowed to escape to a nearby coffee-shop. If they met a group of ethnic Malay gangsters instead, it is likely that the couple would have been harmed and may not have lived past that day. It is ironic that the couple was watching this particular movie on this particular day, as they were in a cinema watching violence and presuming that their own city was fairly safe.

As I mentioned previously, when they first narrated their story over dim sum, concurrent conversations died down and everybody else around the dining table listened in. There was a heavy silence and everyone else around the table was shocked that the couple had gone through something so traumatic. The general atmosphere of that dim sum gathering had become heavier. I suggest that that kind of feeling of uneasiness is one of several effects that the May 1969 riots has over ethnic minority Malaysians. This theme of uneasiness and haunting is something I consider in greater detail in my conclusion.

Besides Federal Cinema, Rex Cinema was another site in Kuala Lumpur where ethnic Chinese gangsters broke in and sought to attack ethnic Malay patrons. In Hanna Alkaf’s novel, *The Weight of Our Sky*, the 16-year-old ethnic Malay protagonist Melati and her best friend Safiyah (also known as Saf) were watching a movie when the screen suddenly changed colour

³⁹ Interview with Kenneth Cheok and Jennifer Ooi at their house on July 4, 2019.

⁴⁰ It is unclear which Chinese language the gangsters spoke to the couple in. It is likely to be Cantonese given the significant presence of Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese in Kuala Lumpur.

and the words, “Darurat, Jangan Keluar” (state of emergency, do not exit) appeared. Some cinema patrons began to panic while others ran towards the exits. However, ethnic Chinese men with matching tattoos blocked the exits wielding sharp weapons. As the leader of the gang separated ethnic Malays from non-Malays, Melati was separated from Saf, her tudung-clad (hijab wearing) friend. When the gangsters approached Melati, they were confused: was she an ethnic Malay or an ethnic Chinese? She had relatively browner skin colour yet did not wear a tudung. At this time, Melati was rescued by an ethnic Chinese lady in her mid-fifties, Auntie Bee, who vouched for her. Auntie Bee told the men, “She’s Eurasian. Serani. She’s one of my neighbours’ girls. We live near Petaling Jaya.”⁴¹ Although the men were skeptical, they shrugged their shoulders and allowed Melati and Auntie Bee to leave. Melati did not want to leave her friend behind, so she squirmed as Auntie Bee dragged her to the door. Melati saw “Saf’s pale, frightened face, her eyes huge with despair and unshed tears, her hand outstretched in mute appeal” as the doors closed, leaving “nothing but the heavy weight of oppressive silence.”⁴²

Melati’s experience of the riots at Rex Cinema is fictional, but it is loosely based on the real-life experiences of cinemagoers. Johan Fernandez, a 21-year-old ethnic Indian clerk with the Malaysian government Department of Statistics, was watching “Rachel, Rachel” at Rex Cinema with a friend when suddenly the film stopped playing and a state of emergency was announced.⁴³ As the audience attempted to exit the building, Rex Cinema staff members “struggled to pull grills to stop a mob carrying sharp objects from entering the premises.” Fernandez attempted to

⁴¹ Hanna Alkaf, *The Weight of Our Sky* (New York: Salaam Reads, 2019), 38.

⁴² *Ibid*, 39.

⁴³ Johan Fernandez is not a pseudonym. In Malaysia, he is known primarily as a journalist, but in early May 1969, he had just interviewed to be a journalist with the Straits Times newspaper. My thanks to Seenhou Tham for sharing video clips of Johan Fernandez’s sharing his experience through the June 2019 Malaysiakini event, “May 13: An Intergenerational Conversation”.

escape but was ultimately confronted by the mob who had broken in. Fortunately for him, the mob “only wanted to attack people of a certain ethnicity.”⁴⁴ As such, Fernandez made his escape while they were not looking and survived.

Accounts by the ethnic Chinese couple, Melati, and Johan Fernandez demonstrate how cinemas in Kuala Lumpur were spaces where interracial violence took place. At Federal Cinema and Rex Cinema, Kenneth Cheok, Jennifer Ooi, and Johan Fernandez were allowed to escape as they were not the racial target of the ethnic Chinese gangsters who broke in looking to enact violence. Although Melati is an ethnic Malay, the fact that she did not wear a tudung confused the ethnic Chinese gangsters and allowed for an ethnic Chinese stranger, Auntie Bee, to intervene and save her from harm. When we put these accounts in conversation with what Ying Xin Show writes in her analysis of Malaysian literature about the riots, we can confirm that “during the conflict, people are killed according to their appearance.”⁴⁵ These accounts show how rioters made quick decisions regarding who to harm.

Appearances can be deceiving and sometimes people could be wrongfully targeted even if the perpetrators of violence and victims were of the same race during the riots. For example, an ethnic Chinese man wearing a shirt with colourful prints was almost harmed by an ethnic Chinese mob after he escaped Capitol Cinema and took refuge in a nearby shop called Fook Thai Hin.⁴⁶ Capitol Cinema was located across the street from Federal Cinema on Jalan Raja Laut. Like Federal Cinema, an ethnic Chinese mob charged into Capitol Cinema to harm ethnic

⁴⁴ <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/491711>.

⁴⁵ Ying Xin Show, “Narrating the Racial Riots of 13 May 1969,” 13.

⁴⁶ In this context, the “shirt with colourful prints” that the ethnic Chinese man was wearing can be understood to be a batik shirt. Given the fact that the man was hiding in darkness and that batik shirts are usually worn by ethnic Malay men, the rioters mistook him for an ethnic Malay.

Malays at around 8 o'clock in the evening of May 13. As the ethnic Chinese man hid in Fook Thai Hin, he remembers how "there were pipes thrown at me and they landed right next to my feet". When he yelled, "I am a Chinese!" in Mandarin, the rioters spared his life as they realized that they were attacking an ethnic Chinese, not an ethnic Malay.⁴⁷ This example illustrates the precarity of cinemagoers' life as they fled cinemas and sought refuge.

2.2 Taking Refuge

As a newly ordained Catholic priest, 32-year-old Daniel Chow was unhappy that the French parish priest he was subordinate to did not allow him to leave the church and use his car to take some of the stranded Malaysians back to the parish. Although Chow felt frustrated about the situation he was in, his frequent presence at the church and the local community did not go unnoticed. Since he was one of the first ethnic Chinese Malaysian priests to be posted to Peel Road Church,⁴⁸ it is likely that the ethnic Chinese squatter community nearby felt that the parish priest would let them take refuge in the parish hall during the riots. After all, Peel Road Church bordered the largely ethnic Malay neighbourhood of Kampung Pandan. The squatters perhaps believed that Chow, as a fellow ethnic Chinese, could help persuade the European priest to allow them to use the church grounds as a refuge. Chow remembers,

Chow: So closer to where we were, Cheras Peel Road, that's what we call this, squatter houses, are mainly Chinese. Mainly Chinese. So it's all curfew, and all that. And then I remember, I think the next day... um the, the Chinese community there, some, what do you call it, for safety, they came to see the parish priest, whether night time-ah, the women and children, night time, whether they can come into the church compound to sleep, in the parish hall? And he said, "Yeah, yeah, can". So that was how it was arranged-lah. You know? The curfew was imposed, they all come into the parish

⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHrd4t9Rze0>

⁴⁸ Peel Road Church was renamed Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the mid 1970s. It is located to the east of downtown Kuala Lumpur. <https://sacredheartkl.org/index.php/parish-organisation/parish-priest/past-parish-priest>

compound, the hall there, they pass the night there, and then some of them, the men will stand guard-lah. And it went on for several nights-lah. Until things, things became more calm, and found there was no need to have this arrangement. But the tension was *very high*.

Me: As for the church, do you provide anything?

Chow: For them? No, we are not able to! The number is too big. The women and children are quite big in number.

Me: Quite big, 100 over?

Chow: Yeah, yeah...⁴⁹

While Peel Road Church was a religious space meant for Catholics, the priests opened their doors to the ethnic Chinese squatters who, according to Chow, did not believe in Catholicism. From this example, we see the ways in which Malaysians helped each other across religious divides during the riots.

Like Daniel Chow, a Malay Muslim religious leader provided shelter for Muslims and non-Muslims within the walls of his mosque. On the evening of May 13, an ethnic Indian woman named Uma Ramaswamy Iyer was waiting for a bus at the Jalan Ampang bus stop to return to her Gurney Road home from school.⁵⁰ Suddenly an ethnic Chinese man ran towards her, beckoning for her to run for her life as she could be killed by the violence that had broken out nearby. She ran and initially took shelter at a nearby building in Kampung Baru with the help of a security guard from the Securicor office in the Safuan Building. However, the building was soon breached by rioters, so she escaped using the back door and climbed over a wall, falling right into the banks of the Gombak River.⁵¹ She recalled,

I have never in my life walked along the banks of the river and on that rainy night, cried all the way, frightened that some crocodiles might eat us up. By then, there were many people along the route... We went on the nearest road which lead us to a mosque. There were lots of people who took refuge at the mosque and all we could do was to cry our

⁴⁹ Interview with Daniel Chow inside his retirement home room on July 1, 2019.

⁵⁰ In 1969, Uma Ramaswamy Iyer was a 13-year-old student at the Convent Bukit Nanas school in Kuala Lumpur.

⁵¹ After consulting a map of Kuala Lumpur, I believe she was referring to the Klang River as opposed to the Gombak River.

eyes out hoping that we could get home that night or else face the music from the family. Little did we realize that this was all a racial fight. We did not understand what was going on.⁵²

Although Uma Ramaswamy Iyer was not a Muslim, the mosque's imam took her in and cared for her and many others during the riots. Three days later, he walked out to the main road and managed to ask a police patrol car to drive her home. The imam's action, taken together with what Daniel Chow did, demonstrates how religious leaders provided shelter within their places of worship for everyone escaping the riots, including those who did not share the same religious beliefs as they did.

Besides that, more economically privileged Malaysians provided shelter to less fortunate Malaysians during the riots. For example, a middle-aged ethnic Chinese couple opened up their private home for the squatters who lived nearby to them. Nancy Pua and her husband, Mark, lived in a bungalow house on Seavoy Road, an upper middle-class neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur. Mark was an army veteran with experience in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). The 38-year-old ethnic Chinese couple and their two children had just moved from Ipoh to Kuala Lumpur. They believed their neighbourhood would be unsafe, so they took shelter in the Ministry of Defense building. While there, an army medical doctor they knew asked if they would like to stay in his house instead. They took up the doctor's offer and took refuge in his residence. Because of the curfew, the Pua family ended up staying with the doctor's family for a month.⁵³ During that month, their house on Seavoy Road became a refuge for the squatter community living nearby. Nancy Pua remembers

⁵² Malaysiakini, "Protected at the Kampung Baru mosque," from "Cerita Mei 13 Kami (Our May 13 Stories)" *Malaysiakini*, 2019, <https://pages.malaysiakini.com/may13/stories/>.

⁵³ Interview with Nancy Pua at her house on July 2, 2019.

Pua: There's a garage by the side, the old-fashioned bungalow house, got garage, and then at the back there, got village people. Very poor people, they were *so* scared, they came and ask, whether they can come into our place and stay because we have all the, fencing! They stay, their place there, there's no fencing, so they're scared of the riot, so they, they ask for shelter. We gave them shelter.

Me: OK, wow... And these village people were they Chinese or Malay people?

Pua: All Chinese, all Chinese. They are in the outskirts of Setapak. Seavoy road is in Setapak area.⁵⁴ So they're just at the back of my house, because my house is fenced up. So they asked...

Me: So this was after you move out of the army doctor's house, one week later?

Pua: Yes, oh no, when we move out, they stay in our place. They stay in our place. I think when we come back, then they move back.

Me: Do you know how many of these village people?

Pua: We don't know how many of them

Me: Would you say they were staying in squatter houses or, what kind of...?

Pua: Squatters. In fact we've never been inside, just behind our house, door to door, we never ventured.⁵⁵

Pua's narrative provides a window to observe how more well-to-do urban families with fences surrounding their houses cared for their less fortunate counterparts who were more exposed to violent street activity during the riots. When we put the Peel Road Church story and the Kampung Baru mosque story together with the example of the Pua family opening their doors to squatters, we see how Malaysians helped each other across class and religious lines during the riots through the provision of shelter. These narratives are important as it problematizes the conventional understanding of the riots of Kuala Lumpur, where some scholars argue that ethnic Malays harmed non-ethnic Malays and vice versa.

⁵⁴ Seavoy Road is now called Jalan Titiwangsa, and is located approximately 3.5 kilometers north of the Selangor Menteri Besar's residence in Kampung Baru. See Mariana Isa and Maganjeet Kaur, *Kuala Lumpur Street Names: A Guide to Their Meanings and Histories* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015), 221.

⁵⁵ Interview with Nancy Pua at her house on July 2, 2019.

2.3 “Vigilante Corps”

Michael Teoh was on the way back to his Bukit Bintang flat from work with a few colleagues when he “saw a lot of people rushing, rushing back.” A kind taxi driver briefly stopped his car and warned them to go home quickly. When the 27-year-old turned on his radio, he heard that something had happened along Chow Kit Road, a predominantly ethnic Chinese area of Kuala Lumpur. He then heard Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman declare a curfew. Looking outside his window, he saw fire and smoke from the direction of Chow Kit Road and Kampung Baru.

Teoh did not have much time to react to what he heard and saw. He lived in Bukit Bintang. At the time, Bukit Bintang had some ethnic Chinese gangsters controlling the area. As news of the riots and curfew broke out, one of the Bukit Bintang *daikors*, or gangster heads, organized all the neighbours in the flat. Teoh remembers,

Teoh: Everybody have to assembly together, and then uh... you have to do some patrolling in our area. So the *daikors* is directing, you know? Who will do what, who will do what, you know, something like that. And uh... we have to protect ourself-lah, because when you see the smokes from that, that area, whether they, those uh... the racial clash will spill to our area, we don't know. So everybody have to get ready. And uh... we started to organize, and uh... our own man have to, gather together, and then uh... take turns to patrol. And uh... in our road, access road to outside, main road, all will be manned, will be closed by the rubbish tank or whatever it is, those that can put up an obstacle, then we will put up, because we are afraid that those people may, you know, may drive, drive a lorry or whatever and just come in. So we just have to block, all the entrance, with whatever things we have-lah, you know? So and then, with the... the motorbike patrolling, you know, and uh we have to set up the alarm also... the drum, you know, the empty drum, make noise.

Me: And bang it?

Teoh: Bang it, anything the alarm, bang it-lah. So that's the only, uh, device can use for the alarm [chuckles] so then the, the... daikor and their... their member of the gangster then they have their own weapon, but for us, we don't have the weapon! So they ask us to find our own weapon. So have to find wood... you know? Uh... the water pipe, you know. So find that one and then saw it, and distribute it to everybody, they find whatever it is-lah. Then distribute to everybody, because everybody has to defence, your community, right? You cannot say that you, you *hide* somewhere, others will protect you.

So it was... it was... that, that was the... action that was instructed by the *daikor*-lah. And then the, all the lighting must be on, because in the night quite dark. And uh... we... expect, we expect that, you know, maybe, some spillover will be in our area, but fortunately, it won't, it was not happen.⁵⁶

Teoh was not alone in being coerced by local ethnic Chinese gangsters into participating in a neighbourhood self-defence group. 22-year-old ethnic Chinese Fred Yong shared a similar experience of participating in such a group in Bukit Bintang. Unlike Teoh, however, Yong was an organizer in his neighbourhood. He recalls:

Yong: as a bachelor, as you know, I had no food, but I had to... we formed, we formed vigilante corps. Vigilante corps, you know? [excitedly] not a lot of people had the privilege of having FM radio, I had FM radio, and FM where you can lock into the... police frequency, you know, [in a normal voice] not that I'm stealing but just so happen can lock into the frequency, and then we know, their, their movements, where they're going and so on and so forth. More or less a lot of my surrounding areas we had squatters at the back, Imbi Road at the back, then there's a back road, a back garden, very wild garden, they go around and come around and they bring food and so on and so forth. So you have passwords and so on when you form the vigilante corps. Not to fight. [pause] But to prevent ourselves from getting hurt. I have to emphasize that. We did not fight, but we prevent and inform each other if there's any... any movement or anything threatening our safety. So there were a lot of gangsters, they known as Zero Eight in Imbi Road, you got the 18 Immortal Brothers in Bukit Bintang, they drop all their, rivalry and group together.

Me: And so how did you do in terms of food?

Yong: We formed a sort of vigilante, we help each other. The shopkeepers will give us some food, maybe some, I don't know, tidbits whatever, we survive through anyway.⁵⁷

Daikors played an important role in predominantly ethnic Chinese neighbourhoods in Kuala Lumpur like Bukit Bintang. As shopkeepers paid gangsters protection money on a monthly basis, these gangsters promised to protect their local community from harm. During the riots, the gangsters honoured their promise and organized a resistance against potential ethnic Malay

⁵⁶ Interview with Michael Teoh at his house on July 18, 2019.

⁵⁷ Interview with Fred Yong at his house on July 9, 2019.

rioters heading toward their neighbourhood These accounts not only demonstrate the strength of local communities and their own formations of power, but also how embedded gangsterism was in everyday life in Kuala Lumpur.

Chapter 3: Wounded State: Medical Workers and Volunteers at a Time of Crisis

Elizabeth Yau remembered her adrenalin taking over as riot victims poured into the General Hospital (GH) in Kuala Lumpur. Originally from Penang,⁵⁸ Yau was a relatively new nurse at the General Hospital, having just completed her training as a nurse in Britain a year before the riots broke out in May 1969. When I asked about her experience working in the General Hospital over dessert at a café in a Kuala Lumpur shopping mall, she made sure nobody else was listening to our conversation by looking behind and around her. She said, “it was quite scary. [in a whisper] Because... uh... we were not used to seeing people being slashed at. Slashed at.”⁵⁹ She was 23 years old at the time, working the evening shift on the first day of the riots, when ethnic Chinese Malaysians were rushed into the General Hospital with *parang* (machete) wounds all over their bodies.

At first, when they just started coming in-ah, they were slashed. The injuries were easier to manage. Because you merely go, where the cut is. You know, you follow the cut and you sew together. But later when they came with the gunshot wounds, it’s more difficult. Especially if the gunshot went through the abdomen, you have to make sure, you know, was OK, no perforation here, perforation there... and uh... Tuesday, Wednesday, I think we only finish operating on Thursday in the morning.

Yau and her General Hospital colleagues “worked non-stop” for more than 24 hours. She was completely exhausted by Thursday morning.

This chapter demonstrates how testimonies by medical workers and volunteers at the General Hospital provide a unique perspective on the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. Existing

⁵⁸ Penang is a northern state in West Malaysia.

⁵⁹ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019. In this chapter, I have used pseudonyms for all names, except for Jagdev Singh Badhesha and Kuan Joo Lim, who we will encounter towards the middle of this chapter.

scholarly understanding have neither utilized the General Hospital as a focal point, nor the contributions made by medical workers and volunteers, also known as healers of violence, when considering the history of the riots. Other scholars of the riots have not focused on these individuals likely due to the difficulty of persuading such individuals to share their experience of the violence as well as the lack of records about the events at the General Hospital. As such, this chapter focuses on a specific group of people who were not invested in the violence and instead wanted to provide care and prevent lasting physical damage to the riot victims. As seen in Yau's narrative, hospital staff kept vivid memories of the chronology of bodily trauma suffered by victims of the riots. Through their testimonies we can trace the development and escalation of the violence throughout the week-long violence in Kuala Lumpur.

This chapter argues that narratives by hospital workers and volunteers at the General Hospital help us understand two things. Firstly, the narratives demonstrate the spatial and racial extent and limits of the riot. Secondly, they highlight the ways in which people of different races interacted with and cared for each other, even though an interracial riot was going on outside the doors of the General Hospital. After all, the General Hospital was within a one-kilometer radius of the Menteri Besar's residence in Kampung Baru. As pointed out in the introduction, the Menteri Besar's residence was one of the centers for the organization of violence. The testimonies below by Elizabeth Yau, Wai Leong Ng, TC, Jagdev Singh Badhesha, and Kuan Joo Lim demonstrate how Malaysians worked with colleagues across racial lines to save lives. The General Hospital was a neutral zone. All of the hospital workers and volunteers that I spoke to undoubtedly helped save many injured patients during the riots. However, they too suffered because of the riots, as they endured some form of mental harm as a result. I explore the latter at the end of this chapter.

3.1 GH Parangs

The first time I met Wai Leong Ng was at the bar of a prestigious golf club in downtown Kuala Lumpur. I was introduced to Ng through a family friend. At the time of the riots in 1969, he was a 28-year-old ethnic Chinese senior doctor who worked at the General Hospital. Speaking over a band belting out 1970s music, while sipping some scotch and eating *kacang* (roasted peanuts), Ng prefaced the interview by asking, “do you know about the ISA?” It is an offence under the Internal Security Act, or ISA to utter or issue a publication with a “seditious tendencies,” which includes the questioning of “sensitive” constitutional issues such as the special privileges of the ethnic Malays in Malaysia. At this point, I could not help but think that perhaps fear of the ISA is one of the reasons why Ng not only suggested we meet at an exclusive location, but also in a bar under the cover of a band playing loud music in the background. We can think of Ng’s paranoia as a warning to me, the researcher, of the sensitivities of conducting research into the riots. When I asked Ng about his experience of the riots, he vividly remembers a man screaming nearby to him while he was attending to patients with slash wounds in the surgery ward. Ng went in the direction of the scream, only to discover it was Tong. Tong was Ng’s ethnic Chinese houseman⁶⁰ who was supposed to be on his way home to get some rest having completed his night shift. However, given the racial rioting taking place outside the walls of the General Hospital, Tong was probably scared to travel home alone. As such, he chose to find a spare hospital bed to rest that night.⁶¹ As Ng approached Tong in an unoccupied patient

⁶⁰ A houseman is a junior doctor.

⁶¹ Since the General Hospital is located near an ethnic Malay area, Tong was scared of losing his life if he left the hospital after his shift to go home.

ward, Tong pointed out two parangs carefully hidden underneath a hospital bed. While Ng was relating this story to me 50 years later, he said,

You know that means-ah, you know, [in a whisper] the hospital workers are also part of the riots. You think the hospital is safe, it's not that safe. Because they are all from the area. Even if they are from other states, they will come here also, will rent somewhere near the area.⁶²

Ng was not alone in witnessing the storage of parangs in the General Hospital, a weapon used by perpetrators of violence during the riots. Yau as well admitted that she felt scared because, “your colleagues coming to work, with bloodied parangs, because they were involved in the killings.”⁶³

Yau and Ng's testimonies about seeing parangs at the General Hospital reveal several things about the riots. Firstly, they reveal how shocked Yau and Ng were to discover weapons, the same ones that were being used to inflict the wounds they have been treating during the initial phase of the riots. Secondly, they reveal the precarity of the people working at the General Hospital, since it was possible that their ethnic Malay colleagues who came to work with parangs would use their weapons against the ethnic Chinese or ethnic Indian hospital workers or patients.

Although some of Yau and Ng's colleagues brought weapons to work and perhaps participated in the violence outside, both of my interviewees did not mention any violence that took place in the General Hospital. It is probable that they did not mention anything of that sort because they neither experienced nor heard of such violence in the hospital. As such, it is likely that the hospital workers who engaged in the riots not only stopped attacking each other when they were working in the hospital, but also attended to patients of various races. Perhaps we can

⁶² Interview with Wai Leong Ng at a prestigious golf club in downtown Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 2019.

⁶³ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

observe here that when one works in a hospital as a doctor or nurse, one would need to attend to all patients assigned to them, regardless of race.

The absence of violence and cessation of hostilities at the General Hospital are significant and should not be taken for granted for two reasons. Firstly, it shows that the perpetrators of violence viewed the General Hospital as a neutral place. In cases of riots and mass killings in other context and situations, hospitals have been pillaged or damaged by rioters.⁶⁴ It is likely that hospital workers who engaged in violence before and perhaps even after going to work felt that they were constrained by the awareness of bystanders, as well as their identity and professional ethics as healthcare workers. Secondly, the General Hospital as a workplace had people of various races working together to save lives. As such, we can view the encounter of hidden parangs underneath a hospital bed by Ng and Tong in a different perspective. It would not be too much of a stretch to imagine some ethnic Malay hospital workers engaging in violence against ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians outside the hospital, then coming to work in the hospital to help save lives of the very people they were targeting outside their workplace. The vice versa is probably true as well. Likewise, recalling how the General Hospital was located within a one-kilometer radius of a violence hotspot, hospital workers who brought weapons with them to their workplace perhaps did so as a means of self-defence.

3.2 A Wounded Chronology of the Riots

Descriptions of the wounds suffered by riot victims serve as a method in which we can understand the progression and extent of the violence in Kuala Lumpur. As mentioned in the

⁶⁴ Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 64, 76.

opening vignette for this chapter, victims of the riots were initially injured by parang slashes. These victims were likely to be slashed by ethnic Malays who were incited to riot by UMNO politicians.⁶⁵ They later suffered gunshot injuries, which Yau described as “more difficult” to deal with given the internal injuries caused by the bullets.⁶⁶ Ng remembers that the riot victims did not just suffer parang slashes and gunshot injuries, but also wounds from bearing scrappers.

You see when you say, in the beginning, you see the wounds-ah, the wounds coming in are all parang wounds. You know parang is used by the Malays only, parang, that’s why I say, all the injury coming in, parang wounds, you see the Malays were using parang to chop people OK? Then there was a bit of fightback. Then you get this gangster, they use this bearing scrapper, bearing scrapper... poke inside, the wound becomes bigger, then organs become damage. Bearing scrapper. So the parang wounds came in, the Malays being injured by bearing scrapper, so Chinese fighting back.⁶⁷

Why was there a change in the type of weapons used by the perpetrators of violence, from parangs and bearing scrappers to guns? As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, announced a city-wide curfew by the evening of May 13 to calm down the racially tense streets of Kuala Lumpur.⁶⁸ With police forces under considerable stress, members of the Armed Forces were brought in to help end the street violence by enforcing the curfew with arms. Anyone who broke curfew would be shot. This last point is significant to demonstrate a chronology of the riot violence through wounds as ordinary Malaysians used everyday items like parangs and bearing scrappers, whereas the police and Armed Forces had access to guns. As the police and Armed Forces brutally enforced the curfew

⁶⁵ Refer to my introduction for more details on this.

⁶⁶ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

⁶⁷ Interview with Wai Leong Ng at a prestigious golf club in downtown Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 2019.

⁶⁸ Anthony Reid, “The Kuala Lumpur Riots and the Malaysian Political System,” *Australian Outlook* 23, no. 3 (1969): 264.

as a means to halt street violence, there were more and more riot victims who had gunshot wounds as opposed to slash wounds.

3.3 Medical Volunteers

With the General Hospital's resources under strain during the initial days of the riots, members and volunteers of the wider Kuala Lumpur medical community put themselves in harm's way by coming together to help relieve the government doctors and nurses. Professors and students of medicine from University Hospital, located around 12 kilometers away from General Hospital, as well as Malaysian Red Cross members did so in two ways: by donating blood and by helping out in the General Hospital. TC, a 23-year-old medical student at the University Hospital during the May riots, shared his experience with *Malaysiakini* reporters in May 2019.⁶⁹ After noticing patients injured with abdominal stab wounds nearby the university at the Kampung Kerinchi overpass, he and a few others "organized a blood donation drive from those students who were in the colleges."⁷⁰ Yau shared a similar story:

Yau: University Hospital, one of the professors came later in the night. He rounded up all the medical students and made them donate blood...

Me: And this was done in GH?

Yau: I don't know, all I know is they came about 2 am. You know, to help us. I think they must have bled them in University. At least he thought of this, right?⁷¹

Yau is unsure how the donated blood made its way from University Hospital, established just one year before the riots,⁷² but it helped provide much needed supplies for the patients at the

⁶⁹ *Malaysiakini*, "Working at the GH Emergency," from "Cerita Mei 13 Kami (Our May 13 Stories)".

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

⁷² https://www.ummc.edu.my/ummc/about_us.asp See also, Philip Mathews, *Chronicles of Malaysia: Fifty Years of Headline News, 1963-2013*. (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2014), 54.

General Hospital. These two blood donation stories show how the wider medical community galvanized together to help the overburdened General Hospital. The stories are significant to add to our understanding of the riots as they illustrate how University Hospital's professors and medical students risked their lives by choosing to travel during the ongoing nationwide curfew between University Hospital and the General Hospital in order to support their colleagues working on the frontlines. As an example of the precarity of the situation for those moving around Kuala Lumpur to deliver supplies, Daniel Chow, the priest we met in the previous chapter, told me in an interview that he was almost physically harmed when passing by the predominantly ethnic Malay neighbourhood of Kampung Kerinchi, located between the General Hospital and University Hospital. He had decided to become a Malaysian Red Cross volunteer to help with relief efforts around Kuala Lumpur. He remembers:

The cars-ah, they were passing, Kampung Kerinchi, there, there was a overhead bridge, pedestrian overhead bridge there, [whispering] and people up there, and cars passing, they will have *stones* and *bricks*, and all that, they time it at such a way...⁷³

The medical community not only got people to donate blood, but some also physically went to the General Hospital to help relieve the burden of the frontline doctors and nurses. One of those people was TC, who went to the General Hospital with three surgeons and three fellow students.⁷⁴ TC performed triage duties in the Emergency Room while the surgeons operated on patients.⁷⁵ Jagdev Singh Badhesha was a doctor working in private practice who was called up

⁷³ Interview with Daniel Chow inside his retirement home room on July 1, 2019.

⁷⁴ University Hospital produced its first graduates in 1969 as the University of Malaya medical faculty was only established in 1964. See S. M. A. Alhady, "The History and Development of Surgery in Malaysia," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Surgery* 48, no. 4 (1978): 355.

⁷⁵ Malaysiakini, "Working at the GH Emergency," from "Cerita Mei 13 Kami (Our May 13 Stories)."

by the Malaysian Red Cross to help attend to patients.⁷⁶ At this point, he was transported to the General Hospital.⁷⁷ He vividly remembers them coming to his house to pick him after midnight:

They pick me up, alright? Took me to General Hospital casualty, a lot of casualties with cuts and bruises and all that, and uh so, I was taken to the trauma ward and said, “Doc, please attend to this.” So we attended and the same time, Doctor Mohamed Merican was there... we were both stitching and cleaning, stitching and cleaning and all, doing what we can. And after that uh... [clears throat], the next couple of days, they said, “you stay with casualty, alright?” So I kept on doing casualty work and new cases.⁷⁸

From the testimonies shared by TC and Jagdev, it is evident that volunteers played a pivotal role in alleviating the burden General Hospital healthcare workers faced in treating riot victims. Even then, Jagdev told me that the General Hospital was not only crowded and full of casualties, but also faced a shortage of medical supplies and food.⁷⁹ When I asked Yau if there was enough food for the patients at the General Hospital, she said:

Yau: The patients didn’t have food. And the... Red Cross people came and gave them biscuits and Milo.

Me: Oh I see. Were there a lot of Red Cross volunteers working around the hospital?

Yau: Around the hospital, I don’t know, because we were too busy at the theatre room to look. But eventually the director of the hospital, managed to go to Weld Supermarket, you remember Weld Supermarket, on Weld Road? He went there, and he bought everything, and brought it to the hospital so that they could cook food for the patients.⁸⁰

The General Hospital was understandably unprepared to face such a strain on its resources. If the hospital director did not purchase additional food from Weld Supermarket, “the first full-fledged

⁷⁶ Interview with Jagdev Singh Badhessa at his house on July 18, 2019. He was working with Drs Young, Newton and Partners at the time of the riots. Today, the Malaysian Red Cross Society is called the Malaysian Red Crescent Society.

⁷⁷ Adrian David, “Dr Jagdev Singh Badhessa: From Milk Boy to Aviation Medicine Expert,” *New Straits Times Online*, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/pulse/2019/07/500773/dr-jagdev-singh-badhessa-milk-boy-aviation-medicine-expert>.

⁷⁸ Interview with Jagdev Singh Badhessa at his house on July 18, 2019.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

supermarket in the 1960s”, many of the General Hospital patients would have suffered from hunger.⁸¹

The General Hospital was rather limited in its capacity. It had been built by the British colonial state for a limited number of people. Kuala Lumpur was primarily a tin mining city.⁸² First and foremost, the British colonials prioritized the health of the Europeans living in the Straits Settlements of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca. It was not until the British spread their influence across the Malay peninsula that the British opened a pauper hospital outside the Straits Settlements. The first of these pauper hospitals was the hospital in Taiping, established in 1878.⁸³ A doctor named S.M.A. Alhady recalls how the General Hospital was “originally established as a pauper hospital in 1889.”⁸⁴

Anthropologist Lenore Manderson notes that “Chinese associations and individual philanthropists played an important role in the delivery of healthcare to the non-European population”.⁸⁵ While the General Hospital was likely to have expanded throughout the years, it was only “replaced by the sprawling modern 2,500-bed general hospital in 1973.”⁸⁶

The blood donation and volunteer patient-treating efforts demonstrate how the wider Kuala Lumpur medical community got together to support its General Hospital colleagues during the riots. The General Hospital’s unpreparedness in the face of having to deal with a sudden spike in patients, such as the lack of food and medical supplies, was mitigated somewhat by the

⁸¹ www.theweld.com.my/theweld/about_page.html

⁸² J. M. Gullick, *A History of Kuala Lumpur (1857-1939)* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1983), 1-5.

⁸³ Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the State: Health and Illness in Colonial Malaya, 1870-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15.

⁸⁴ Alhady, “The History and Development of Surgery in Malaysia,” 355.

⁸⁵ Manderson, *Sickness and the State*, 15.

⁸⁶ Alhady, “The History and Development of Surgery in Malaysia”, 355.

efforts of people like TC and Jagdev. Thus, these stories demonstrate the importance of volunteering oneself during a period of emergency, even though these volunteers were putting themselves in harm's way.

3.4 Impact of the Riots on the Doctors, Nurses, and Volunteers

While the doctors and nurses I interviewed did not suffer any physical injuries from the riots, all of them suffered some degree of mental harm. This is consistent with what scholars of riots in other contexts have found in their own research. When asked to reflect on her experience of the 1969 riots, Yau said,

if *you* were abroad, they would always have this post-trauma thing that they put you through, to help you overcome whatever you have seen. But I have a feeling-ah because, we are Asians-ah, and the Buddhist teaching, you, you, always have to move on, no matter what. And you have to *detach* yourself from things. Of course, people move on. They find detachment to be quite difficult, which is, actually quite difficult, even if you loooooose someone, who was very dear to you. Or it could be your pet. You are not supposed to stay. Yes, you can mourn, but you have to move on. So maybe very early on, that type of, upbringing, you know, and instilling into us, that you really have to move on, you can't just stay there. So I guess that helped. But it... maybe also the system went into shock.⁸⁷

Yau's testimony demonstrates the lack of counselors or mental health professionals available to help medical workers and volunteers, particularly those who treated riot victims, deal with their post-trauma harm. According to Yau, this continued to be the case even after the violence from the riots had subsided in Kuala Lumpur.

Both of the volunteer doctors were traumatized by what they had experienced at the General Hospital too. Jagdev described the General Hospital's accident and emergency ward as a

⁸⁷ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

shocking scene, “I had to summon courage and calm my nerves to get the job done — that of assisting the skeleton crew of medical officers in attending to slash victims.”⁸⁸ Ng told me about two cases: one was a young man who was shot for “breaking curfew” while taking out the trash and a younger classmate of his who was killed.

I remember distinctly one case, one shot, still OK, can remove the bullet-ah, I asked him, “where were you?” he said, “Batu Road.” Batu Road is Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman now. This was two, three days. Just, just come out to pour the rubbish into the bin outside, then “Bang!” One shot hit. I say, “why you so stupid? you know [it’s] curfew, why you go out and dump rubbish... pour rubbish, you get shot!” [pause] and there was a VI boy, he was my junior, he graduated from New Zealand, he came back, he was sending his colleague back to Kampung Baru, he was killed... Loh Kah Yan, I met his younger brother, Loh Kah Tong. I know these names *because*, I was the secretary-general of the National Geography Society, they were all my members. I saw Loh Kah Tong, I told him, ‘very sorry, I saw your brother’s body.’ He asked me the details, I said, “all these details I cannot remember already.”⁸⁹

While Ng was able to let a family member of the deceased know about the unfortunate passing of his friend, TC perhaps suffered in silence for a long time about the horrible images he saw when he was at the General Hospital’s morgue. He remembers:

Bodies that were burned, stabbed and mutilated. These people died with horror registered in their faces, arm chopped off trying to fend off an attack. Faces that had a very clean cut right across the nose and cheek bone. A sight that I can still remember after 50 years.⁹⁰

These accounts reveal that hospital staff tending to the victims of the riots suffered mental and psychological harm. Recalling the opening vignette, Yau’s rush of adrenalin meant that she tended to many, many cases between the evening of May 13 and the morning of May 15. The adrenalin rush was perhaps part of the reason she was able to be in triage mode and not break

⁸⁸ David, “Dr Jagdev Singh Badhesha.”

⁸⁹ Interview with Wai Leong Ng at a prestigious golf club in downtown Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 2019. When Ng is referring to a VI boy who was his junior, he was referring to his younger schoolmate from Victoria Institute, a prestigious boys school in Kuala Lumpur.

⁹⁰ Malaysiakini, “Working at the GH Emergency,” from “Cerita Mei 13 Kami (Our May 13 Stories).”

down when dealing with the patients. It was very likely that the bloody scene at the hospital would have been shocking for her, especially since she was a new healthcare personnel compared to Ng and Jagdev. She remembers that the process of treating each patient was perhaps a bit dehumanizing, as she and her team had to just put a tag on the victims as they came in, as opposed to asking each victim their identity and prior medical history. She admits:

You actually didn't know them and then when you think about it-ah, in the *Western* sense, they would say you did everything wrong, there was no consent. How can you, you know, [louder], how can you have consent? Because, you are in a sort of a... emergency mode where you have to get things going and try to fix them up as fast as you can, you know without, having to lose them.⁹¹

From this passage, we see that the medical personnel at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital attended to the riot victims in a general and quick manner. Yau, as a nurse trained in Britain, did not employ her “Western” nurse training by asking the injured if they had any reactions or allergies to medicine prior to treatment. Fortunately, she and her team only lost one patient out of the 40 plus cases they dealt with.⁹²

3.5 Encounters with the Military: Ambulance and Armed Forces Escort Stories

Ng, the doctor who spoke to me over drinks and *kacang* at the bar of a golf club in Kuala Lumpur, had multiple interactions with members of the Malaysian Armed Forces. Since he and his wife felt unsafe staying in their house, they took up his sister's offer to temporarily stay with her and his brother-in-law at the Sungai Besi air force base, some 10 kilometers away from the General Hospital. From the base, an air base truck driver drove him to and from the General

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

Hospital every day during the riots. He remembers everyone in the truck being ethnic Malay except for him. During one of his commutes, the ethnic Malay truck driver made a detour to Kampung Dato Keramat, an ethnic Malay neighbourhood four kilometers east of the General Hospital.

They didn't go straight back, they went into Dato Keramat. Dato Keramat is the Gurney Road. They are shooting, Malay soldiers everywhere, I'm the only Chinese bugger, go into a Malay area, then the curfew there, there is no curfew! People just walk around. I asked, "why you want to go there?" Because he want to, the driver wants to deliver, two packets of rice, rice-ah, to his father. So *there*, you see, is different, different environment altogether! Inside there, people cycling around... no curfew! Boys playing around, the neighbour, deliver the rice... [chuckling] so at that time, I didn't want to say anything, just keep quiet. Different type of curfew.⁹³

From Ng's testimony, we see that the curfew was enforced differently in a predominantly ethnic Malay neighbourhood. It is likely that Ng's truck driver ventured into that neighbourhood a few days after the peak of hostilities, as Jagdev told me about a more violent experience in Kampung Dato Keramat. Besides volunteering his time and skills at the General Hospital's trauma ward, Jagdev went on Red Cross ambulances with his team to pick up patients.

Jagdev: To me, it was a challenge looking after patients lah. As long as you have the ambulance and escorts and all that, and also there's a... a Irish nurse, she's also part of the... she came here, as usual, Red Cross and all that, and she was... once we went to pick up some case in Dato Keramat, we were shot at, it was some bullets "bang, bang, bang, bang", so she said, she said, "everyone down!" And ambulance guys, she put them on the ground, we all lay in the ground, until the shooting was over. This was all exciting.

Me: So you went with the ambulance escorts?

Jagdev: Yes I travel in the ambulance. Sometimes, sometimes, chaps will have to go and pick up lah.

Me: How would you describe the atmosphere?

Jagdev: Atmosphere of course tense lah, people were fighting. I mean, you hear about the casualties, the Chinese are fighting, the Malays are fighting against the Chinese, I mean, they hide the anger, but the fight is there lah.⁹⁴

⁹³ Interview with Wai Leong Ng at a prestigious golf club in downtown Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 2019.

⁹⁴ Interview with Jagdev Singh Badhesha at his house on July 18, 2019.

Ng and Jagdev were not the only medical personnel who interacted with the Armed Forces; Yau and TC engaged them as army officers dealt with the deceased. Army officers escorted Yau back to the General Hospital hostel after she had cleared her files. While she was walking back to her hostel, she passed by the mortuary. She was shocked by what she saw.

Yau: Do you know there were truck load of bodies? Truck-loads! The, the... military truck. One full truck, heap how many bodies. And... what... made me soooo emotional was that, the people tossing the bodies there, were very young volunteer workers. And I don't know if it's some antiseptic or whatever they put on them, everybody was sort of like, dark brown. So you really cannot tell, what they are. Whether they are Indian, or Malay, or Chinese, you really cannot tell. There were so many trucks! Then when I got back to the hostel, because of the... decompos...ing bodies, you have the stench right? I've never seen that many of flies, there must have been *millions* of them. Plus on the wall!

Me: In the hostel?

Yau: In the hostel. It's horrible, all you see is just, wall of flies. Never seen so many in my life.⁹⁵

After TC had finished volunteering at the General Hospital, he went back to the University Hospital to continue his studies. While stationed at University Hospital, he remembers how

A week later, the morgue in GH was overused, and they [members of the Malaysian Armed Forces] brought about 30 to 40 bodies to the University Hospital. I volunteered to take them from the truck and we put them into our morgue, three bodies to each cooler... All of these bodies had some form of injury. Then about 10 days later, after some of the bodies had been claimed by their relatives, we were once again told that we had to now move the remaining bodies into another truck. By then the stench was unbearable, and I almost passed out. Fortunately for me, I did not go in the truck, as the bodies were taken to Sungai Buloh for final disposal.⁹⁶

The burials at Sungai Buloh had not been studied in any detail until the 2017 publication of Por's essay "Family Narratives and Abandoned Monuments of the May 13 Riot in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium."⁹⁷ Por partially confirms the government's report regarding the management of

⁹⁵ Interview with Elizabeth Yau at an Indonesian restaurant in Bangsar Shopping Centre on July 3, 2019.

⁹⁶ Malaysiakini, "Working at the GH Emergency," from "Cerita Mei 13 Kami (Our May 13 Stories)."

⁹⁷ Por, "Family Narratives and Abandoned Monuments of the May 13 Riot in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium."

dead bodies. The report said each body was identified, recorded, and buried in such a way that relatives and friends could “exhume the victims for reburial at some later stage or at least to know where they were buried.”⁹⁸ But some bodies were buried in a mass grave without any individual documentation. Drawing on an oral history interview with Kuan Joo Lim, a doctor who went with military personnel to Sungai Buloh, Por finds that the victims’ bodies were buried en masse into a “four-feet deep trench pre-dug by the leprosy inmates.” Lim described to Por how he and his colleagues handled the burial:

just carried and buried, carried and buried, carried and buried ... and the leprosy patients were in charge of shovelling and covering the trenches and the bodies ... that’s all we did ... it took us about three hours to empty about 30 bodies from the lorry.⁹⁹

Lim’s account challenges the official story of how riot victims were managed at the Sungai Buloh mass burial site. In the absence of a declassification of documents related to the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur and the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission, it remains difficult to ascertain which of the two narratives is more accurate than the other.

⁹⁸ National Operations Council, *The May 13 Tragedy*, 68 and 69.

⁹⁹ Por, “Family Narratives and Abandoned Monuments of the May 13 Riot in the Sungai Buloh Leprosarium,” 47.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

This thesis began with the story of Francis Chong, a 14-year-old ethnic Chinese boy who was unable to fall asleep on the night of the riots. When I asked him to describe how things were after the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur, he paused for a moment before replying.

Chong: I think it took some time for things to go back to normal, so even school also, there was some uneasiness-lah, make our, our classmate, Malay classmate all feel something very funny, you know, they don't talk to each other.

Me: Oh okay... And that continued for the rest of the year?

Chong: [pause] I think it takes for a while-lah... I think at that time, at our age, then we don't feel so much of any animosity with our Malay friend, because we just don't really understand the whole situation. Nothing that like, you know enemy, enemy but we are still playing around, but a few feel kind of funny-lah, like why all of the sudden this sort of thing happen?¹⁰⁰

Some of my ethnic Chinese interviewees described their post-riots relationships with their ethnic Malay colleagues and friends in the same vein as Francis Chong, who continued to play with his ethnic Malay friends. The riots did not immediately change relations between non-Malays and Malays in Malaysia. Slowly but surely, however, most of my interviewees told me that they drifted apart from their friends who were not ethnic Chinese. Such a phenomenon perhaps mirrors the entrenchment of Islam in Malaysia, as UMNO politicians increasingly espoused Islamic beliefs as a means to appeal to the more rural, traditional, and conservative ethnic Malay voters.

This work has presented a historical account of the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. It has used a microhistory approach based on oral history interviews to highlight the ways in which some Malaysians cooperated across racial, religious, and class lines in the face of sudden

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Francis Chong at Oriental Pearl Restaurant, Bukit Jalil Golf and Country Resort on July 13, 2019.

violence. While this work is not the first study to use oral history to examine the riots, it is likely the first to combine personal stories with some of the narratives, both fictitious and non-fictitious, that emerged out of the commemorations of the riots in 2019 to mark the passage of fifty years since the riots erupted. With the focus on Malaysians who directly experienced the riots in Kuala Lumpur in May 1969, chapter 2 provided a window into seeing how some Malaysians were able to escape riot violence due to their skin colour or racial background. Additionally, that chapter illustrated how Malaysians helped each other through the provision of care and refuge. Chapter 3 delved into what it was like working and volunteering at the Kuala Lumpur General Hospital during the riots, and the important role healers of violence played as neither perpetrators, bystanders, or victims of violence. As these medical workers and volunteers dealt with injured riot victims, they helped all Malaysians, demonstrating interracial cooperation even while Malaysians of different races were harming each other outside the walls of the General Hospital. Furthermore, that chapter explored the post-riot mental harm many General Hospital workers and volunteers faced.

It is important to research the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur from the perspective of those who survived it for two reasons. Firstly, it is generally understood that the riots entrenched pro-ethnic Malay policies that were set up during the country's independence from the British in 1957, particularly the *bumiputera* ("sons of the soil") policy where ethnic Malays in Malaysia are provided with benefits such as guaranteed spots in public universities, favourable housing, and government contracts. Lisa, a fictional Chinese Malaysian character from scholar and novelist Beth Yahp's short story "So We Walked Down Abercrombie Street," explains the policy to her Australian friends, "In my country, university is free. The problem is it's hard to get in. I mean, if you don't have the right name. Selection is based on race, a certain percentage for each

race, and not proportionate either.”¹⁰¹ The *bumiputera* policy is based on an understanding between the three major races since 1957: the ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians in Malaysia will recognize *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) in exchange for the Alliance, dominated by ethnic Malays, granting citizenship rights to non-ethnic Malays. While such a policy discriminated against the non-ethnic Malays in Malaysia, non-ethnic Malays and ethnic Malays lived with each other peacefully and cared for each other most of the time between 1957 and 1969, including during the violence of May 1969. By looking at the minute details of what was going on during the riots, a different understanding of relations between Malaysians of different races, classes, and religions emerge. After all, microhistory can change readers’ understanding of history, as “it is on this reduced scale, and *probably only on this scale*, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on one side, and social affiliations on another.”¹⁰²

Secondly, many of the narratives I shared have yet to be heard or read about, likely because most of my interviewees are ordinary Malaysians who do not have a public profile within their local communities. Some of my interviewees believe that sharing their experience of the riots are unimportant, while others think that it is not worth sharing due to the sensitivity behind narrating their stories. Given the continued dominance of UMNO in Malaysian politics up until 2018, many ethnic Chinese Malaysians are wary of sharing stories about their past, particularly surrounding the riots of May 1969. It is common for UMNO politicians to remind Malaysians about the violence of the riots whenever Malaysians are about to head into a general

¹⁰¹ Beth Yahp, “So we walked down Abercrombie Street,” in *The Red Pearl and Other Stories* (Australia: Vagabond Press, 2017), 148.

¹⁰² Chartier quoted in Ginzburg, “Microhistory,” 22. The emphases are from Ginzburg’s original text.

election where Malaysians can question the status quo through the ballot box. For example, Kua opened his book about the riots of May 1969 discussing UMNO's general assembly in November 2006, where the "Youth chief threatened Malaysians to not question the status quo or else... May 13 may happen again."¹⁰³

While there are benefits of using oral life history as my primary methodology to examine the riots of May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur, such as a somewhat richer account of how some Malaysians experienced the riots, there are limitations. The most notable limitation is the transformation of oral testimony to written text. By writing out what my interviewees said as opposed to letting readers hear my interviewees' voices, I have had to flatten their voices. I have endeavoured to keep as much of their voice within my transcription of the recorded interviews through block quotes. Unfortunately, some of the specific quality of their voices (cadence, accent, and speed, for example) could not be translated.

Despite such a limitation, this study's approach which has focused on the personal stories of riot victims has led to some rewarding outcomes, both personally and professionally. On a personal level, it has allowed me to appreciate some of the continued and enduring friendships between ethnic Malays and their non-ethnic Malay counterparts, particularly among those who survived the riots of May 1969 in Kuala Lumpur. Besides that, I was surprised that some of my interviewees expressed their gratitude to me, a 20-something-year-old who grew up in Kuala Lumpur, for listening to them tell their stories. For example, Nancy Pua told me how happy she was that I was interviewing her about her experience of the riots, as no one in her family had

¹⁰³ Kia Soong Kua, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: SUARAM, 2007), 2.

thought to ask her perspective about Malaysia's history.¹⁰⁴ Pua's reflection demonstrates the importance of oral life history in creating space for individuals whose voices were previously unheard. Although Pua arguably played a very small part in providing refuge to her less fortunate neighbours, stories like hers are significant in demonstrating how Malaysians came together and helped each other amidst life-threatening violence at their doorstep.

As an individual who looks like and identifies as an ethnic Chinese in Malaysia in his mid-twenties, there were both strengths and limitations to my research process. An advantage I enjoyed was "insider status" among my interviewees. While I conducted the oral history interviews predominantly in English with a faltering Malaysian accent, my interviewees would slip into *Bahasa rojak* (mixed language) when answering my questions. This was good because I could understand them when they code-switched to Malay or Cantonese, and they did not need to explain what they meant when they used terms like, "*kelam-kabut*" or "*daikor*." Moreover, my age was also somewhat of a strength; I did not directly experience the riots, but I live with the repercussions of what happened. Some of my interviewees pointed out how they shared stories with me about the riots in May 1969 as a means to caution the younger generations in Malaysia.

However, my positionality also led to certain limitations. Since I look ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, ethnic Malay interviewees were less likely or less comfortable speaking to me, which in turn led to an imbalance in the racial profile of my interviewees. It is important for me to acknowledge my positionality, as I believe that the personal is political and that history as a discipline necessarily involves a certain level of subjectivity.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Nancy Pua at her house on July 2, 2019.

The narratives shared in this thesis helps us see how Malaysians of different races were able to cooperate with each other amidst deadly violence in May 1969. Previous scholarship on the riots have tended to focus on either the pretext for perpetrators harming victims or the ways in which violence took place. These works are important, especially since organizers and perpetrators of the violence were never punished, given UMNO's control of government between 1957 and 2018. However, my work has highlighted how some ethnic minorities in Malaysia, such as the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Indians, organized and cooperated with their ethnic Malay counterparts to save lives or provide refuge. These life-saving and refuge-providing narratives are significant now more than ever as Malaysians, as of May 2018, live in a post-UMNO dominated environment. Malaysians need to hold each other accountable and not fall into the trap of believing that one racial group is superior to another. My hope is that future work on the May 1969 riots draws more extensively on oral history interviews with elderly Malaysians who experienced the riots in other parts of Malaysia. At the same time, a study exploring the effects of the riots on the post-1969 generation of Malaysians would benefit the field of history more broadly and Malaysian studies more narrowly. With more academic work on the May 1969 riots in Malaysia, scholars can acquire a richer understanding of the violence. After all, the riot left an indelible mark on all Malaysians.

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Oral Interviews

Unless otherwise noted, I conducted the interviews and recorded them, and the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

- Charles Hirschman (not a pseudonym). Seattle, United States of America. September 6, 2019.
- Daniel Chow. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 1, 2019.
- Elizabeth Yau. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 3, 2019.
- Francis Chong. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 13, 2019.
- Fred Yong. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 9, 2019.
- Jagdev Singh Badhesha (not a pseudonym). Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 18, 2019.
- Kenneth Cheok and Jennifer Ooi. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 4, 2019.
- Kuan Joo Lim (not a pseudonym). Selangor, Malaysia. October 28, 2016. Interview by Heong Hong Por.
- Michael Teoh. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 18, 2019.
- Nancy Pua. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 2, 2019.
- Wai Leong Ng. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. July 10, 2019.

Private collection, Charles Hirschman

Letter from Aiman Abidin* to Charles Hirschman, June 1, 1969.

* this is a pseudonym.