

Notes

for

the

Future

Green Zeng:
A Review 2010–2020

The Process of Returning

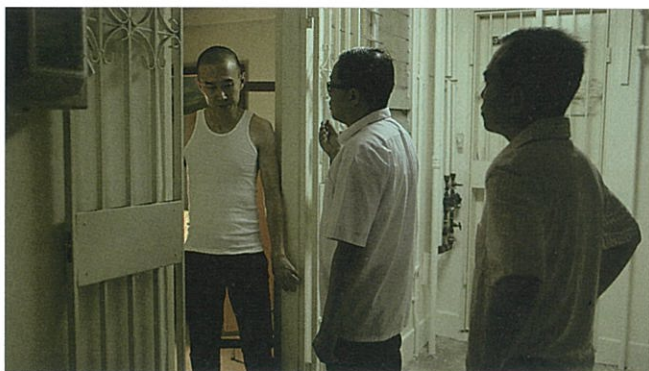
Adam Knee

Any Singapore viewer would fairly immediately recognise the key real-world historical referent for the fictional narrative of Singapore artist Green Zeng's feature film, *The Return*: 1963's Operation Coldstore, in which more than 100 left-wing activists, union leaders, educators, and others were arrested and subsequently detained without trial and questioned under harsh conditions, accused of active support for communist causes.

This is one of the most sensitive and indeed contentious topics in Singapore history; and in its way a singularly important moment in its movement towards modern nationhood (its eventual independence arriving in 1965). And yet, despite this, Zeng's film appears to have relatively little interest in directly engaging with national politics or historical controversy. One might on one level take this to be the film's own intentional embodiment of Nelson Mandela's precept (cited by the fictional protagonist) to shun bitterness over past injustice in order to avoid a present-day spiritual imprisonment (which it may be in part); or, on another level (more cynically) to be the film's strategic avoidance of any difficulty with regulators in its own local market. However, the content and structure of the film itself would suggest that political controversy is de-emphasised in favour of a much greater and more central interest in the complex and often personal processes through which historical discourses, in particular those pertaining to nation and national identity, are developed, circulated, and experienced over time — an interest in fact of consistent importance to Green Zeng's practice across multiple media.

One might see this most directly in the temporal structure of the film, which opens at the moment of protagonist Lim Soon Wen's arrest and then suddenly shifts, in a remarkable 50-year ellipsis during the course of an uninterrupted single shot, to the moment of

Wen's return (the most direct referent of the film's title) from incarceration. Thus, in a single gesture, all of the political background to the events and all of the suffering they engendered are largely bypassed only to make their return (or to be returned to — both of these other resonances of the film's title) over the course of the subsequent narrative, as Wen himself makes allusion to them (in discussions or interviews) or re-encounters them in represented recollections, dreams, and figures connected to his past. However, even in these instances, there is relatively little emphasis on



political controversy or on suffering — not in that Zeng shies away from them (the film unequivocally alludes to them), but in that the main focus is largely on the very process of returning, re-encountering, remembering, reflecting.

The Return presents this process to us through what is an unabashedly 'slow cinema' aesthetic, featuring numerous long takes (often linked by slow dissolves) of Wen looking out over wide vistas of Singapore (in some shots from ledges of public housing projects, in others from the plazas by national monuments) and contemplates both the larger trajectory of his country and the larger trajectory of his own life (something we know not only by inference but also from the various remarks Wen himself makes over the course of the film). Each of the national monuments shown in these scenes of largely silent contemplation, is not only quite familiar to most of the Singapore audience, but also historically if not politically loaded, overflowing with numerous levels of referentiality (as indeed are the HDB — Housing Development Board — projects, themselves key symbols of the nature and speed of Singapore's development).



Among the monuments Wen visits and contemplates are a 19th century statue of Sir Stamford Raffles (the British colonial 'founder' of Singapore and thus automatically a subject of much present-day controversy over historical interpretation), the Cenotaph (an historical monument to fallen soldiers of the two World Wars), and the Nanyang University ('Nantah') Arch (the gateway to a since dissolved Chinese-language university in operation at the time of Operation Coldstore, some of whose students were suspected to be communist sympathisers or activists). One of the things linking all the monuments (and for that matter the character of Wen himself) together is not only an association with historical controversy and contention, but also a sense of radical, vertiginous change and displacement—Raffles (somewhat like Wen himself) standing against an incongruous backdrop of modern Singaporean architecture, and the Nantah Arch (as Wen points out) now separated by an expressway from the remains of the original university campus.





As national monuments are central to Wen's contemplations and to *The Return's* distinctive mapping of Singapore, so is nature, which repeatedly makes a return here in some interesting and pertinent ways. We see nature, for example, in a number of the wide views from HDB projects, where vast expanses of grass stand in striking contrast to the urban surrounds. We see it as well in a scene of Wen's daughter taking a group of people on a tour through one of the remaining patches of original rainforest in Singapore (offering to show them a 400-year old tree), and in multiple scenes of Wen strolling along Singapore's coast. On one level, nature stands here for an older and more contradictory temporal frame of reference than the historical monuments — still another co-located, temporally disparate dimension of the nation. On another, it serves to drive home the distinct location and the distinct situatedness of Singapore: the coastline is a demarcation, a boundary setting the edge of the island nation, and, quite significantly, a boundary in many scenes here reinforced through non-natural means — paved walkways and metal railings (railings which keep the pedestrians from going past national limits and which also thematically recall the prison from which the protagonist has just been released).



This coastal imagery becomes more resonant and situated still in a scene where Wen notes to his daughter the presence of Malaysia across the waterway from where they are standing, discussing his grandfather's life and his own childhood on the other side, his childhood experiences of crossing into Singapore by bridge and by water when his father came to Singapore to work, and his eventual loss of connection to the Malaysian-residing branches of his family after his own immediate family relocated to Singapore. All of this is again historically loaded, engaging Singapore's (and, in parallel, protagonist Wen's) signifi-

cant historical and geographical connection to Malaysia extending back before the island-nation's eventual independence. And just as *The Return* highlights Singapore's regional lineage, it manages to reference its ethnic lineages as well, again in large measure through the figure of Wen. Wen's self-evidently Chinese ethnicity and personal sense of identity are specifically referenced for example through his affiliation with Nanyang University, in his daughter's reminder of how he used to advise her to study hard to improve her Chinese, and in present-day Singaporeans' code-switching from English to Chinese when speaking with him; at the same time, however, reference is also made to Wen's (one might argue characteristically Singaporean) multi-linguality, as we hear that he was one of only two bilingual prisoners in his cellblock at the time of his incarceration, and that while in prison he had learned Malay from a fellow inmate.



At the close of *The Return*, we find Wen once more at that coast, at the literal and figurative edge of Singapore, walking along the protective railing until he disappears from our view, but not in any kind of effort to escape the island — indeed, rather more in an affirmation of his belonging to it. Although Wen is positioned at the film's opening as the consummate outsider, incarcerated for being a threat to the State, over the course of the film we see how intimately linked his history is with that of Singapore's, how so many of the contradictory dimensions of his experience and identity mesh with and arguably even situate him as an emblem for the Singaporean experience as an abstract whole, evolving through disorienting juxtapositions of time and space, and through sometimes rough and confusing interactions of culture, language, and politics. And thus it is not entirely surprising that, in one of the film's final scenes, when offered the opportunity to depart Singapore by joining his daughter (his last direct relative and his de facto caretaker) on her upcoming move to London, he emphatically refuses, shouting "I can't go; this is my home."

Written for the exhibition catalogue of *Returning, Revisiting and Reconstructing* in 2019.