

ADAPTING HISTORY: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN THE FILM ADAPTATION *CONQUER: LAHAD DATU* (2024)

*(Adaptasi Kisah Sejarah: Strategi Naratif dalam Filem Conquer:
Lahad Datu [2024])*

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Abstract

Conquer: Lahad Datu (*Takluk: Lahad Datu*) is a Malaysian film released in 2024, inspired by the real-life incursion that occurred in Kampung Tanduo, Lahad Datu, Sabah, on February 11, 2013 by Sulu militants, which led to the launch of *Operasi Daulat* by the Malaysian security forces. Within the local film landscape, cinematic adaptations based on historical events are still relatively rare. Most adaptations tend to focus on popular novels, making this film a notable exception. This study aims to explore the storyline presented in the film and examine the key elements highlighted in the adaptation. Using Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory as the framework, this study investigates how historical events are transformed into film narrative. The study adopts content analysis as its methodology, focusing on how the film interprets and presents specific events and themes. The analysis reveals that *Conquer: Lahad Datu* stays true to real events. At the same time, the film incorporates powerful thematic elements such as patriotism, national loyalty and unwavering resilience, which enrich the film's narrative and create emotional impact. The movie portrays the harsh realities of armed conflict with great care and attention to detail, but it also adds dramatic touches to make the story more engaging. It skilfully combines intense war-action scenes with deeper messages about courage and determination in protecting Malaysia's sovereignty. Ultimately, this study sheds light on how patriotic values can shine through in historical films and highlights the exciting potential for more Malaysian stories rooted in history to hit the big screen.

Keywords: *Conquer: Lahad Datu*, Malaysian film, historical film adaptation, adaptation theory, content analysis, patriotism

Abstrak

Conquer: Lahad Datu merupakan sebuah filem Malaysia yang diterbitkan pada tahun 2024, diinspirasi daripada pencerobohan kehidupan sebenar yang berlaku di Kampung Tanduo, Lahad Datu, Sabah pada 11 Februari 2013 oleh militan Sulu yang membawa kepada pelancaran Operasi Daulat oleh pasukan keselamatan Malaysia. Dalam landskap filem tempatan, adaptasi sinematik berdasarkan peristiwa sejarah masih agak jarang ditemukan. Kebanyakan adaptasi cenderung untuk memberikan tumpuan pada novel popular, menjadikan filem ini sebagai pengecualian yang ketara. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka jalan cerita yang dipersembahkan dalam filem dan mengkaji elemen utama yang diketengahkan dalam adaptasi. Dengan menggunakan teori adaptasi Linda Hutcheon sebagai rangka kerja, penyelidikan ini menganalisis cara peristiwa sejarah diubah menjadi naratif filem. Kajian ini menggunakan analisis kandungan sebagai metodologi, dengan memfokuskan cara filem itu mentafsir dan mempersembahkan peristiwa dan tema tertentu. Penyelidikan mendedahkan bahawa *Conquer: Lahad Datu* kekal dengan peristiwa sebenar sambil digabungkan dengan tema menarik seperti patriotisme, kesetiaan kepada negara dan kekuatan yang tidak berbelah bahagi. Filem ini menggambarkan realiti sebenar konflik bersenjata dengan tumpuan pada perincian dan juga menambah sentuhan dramatik untuk menjadikan cerita lebih menarik dengan gabungan adegan aksi perang yang sengit dengan mesej yang lebih mendalam tentang keberanian dan keazaman dalam melindungi kebanggaan negara. Akhirnya, kajian ini memaparkan bagaimana nilai-nilai patriotik dapat menyerlah dalam filem sejarah dan menyerlahkan potensi menarik untuk lebih banyak cerita Malaysia yang berakar umbi dalam sejarah ditayangkan di skrin besar.

Kata kunci: Conquer: Lahad Datu, filem Malaysia, adaptasi filem sejarah, teori adaptasi, analisis kandungan, patriotisme

INTRODUCTION

As a form of media art, film emerged as a powerful cultural phenomenon in the 20th century, following its invention and introduction by the Lumière brothers nearly 130 years ago (Zakaria Ariffin, 2005). A film is considered as the product of raw materials shaped through a complex process Zakaria Ariffin that blends technical expertise and the evolving technologies of filmmaking (Zakaria Ariffin, 2005; Edgar-Hunt et al., 2010). It represents a fusion of multiple art forms, thoughtfully orchestrated by its creators (Naim Haji Ahmad, 1995). At its core, a film is created

from the interplay of intellect, emotion, sensitivity, lived experience and the creative skills of individuals known as filmmakers. Today, filmmakers produce films across a variety of genres. Themes such as comedy, romance, patriotism, horror, family and action are popular choices among film productions (Bennett, 2023). As a medium that portrays a wide range of stories, film plays an important role as a bridge between creators and audience. The works produced often reflect the cultural background of society, highlighting current issues as well as those rooted in history. This means that film is not merely for entertainment, but also to educate the public on certain knowledge. Based on this foundation, the importance and benefits of film have expanded through the production of films adapted from various sources. *Conquer: Lahad Datu* is an example of film adaptation based on a true story that took place in Lahad Datu, a district in Sabah, Malaysia.

Lahad Datu is located in eastern Sabah and has a unique and significant history in Malaysia's geopolitical context. The area is not only known for its beauty of nature, but also remembered for an armed incursion that occurred in 2013. This incursion, known by a few names such as "The 2013 Lahad Datu Standoff", "Lahad Datu Incursion" and *Operasi Daulat*, was initiated by a group of armed men who claimed to be followers of the Sulu Sultanate, landing in Sabah with the intention of asserting their claim over the state. The confrontation between the intruders and Malaysian security forces marked the beginning of a violent and intense conflict, claiming the lives of several individuals and escalating tensions throughout the region. In response, the Malaysian government quickly initiated a military operation known as *Operasi Daulat* (or *Ops Daulat*) to neutralise the threat and safeguard national sovereignty (Jelani Hamdan et al., 2023). This was more than just an armed standoff; it was a true test of Malaysia's resilience, diplomacy and unity. The crisis highlighted the unwavering commitment and bravery of the Malaysian Armed Forces (Angkatan Tentera Malaysia) and the Royal Malaysia Police (Polis Diraja Malaysia), who stood their ground in defence of the nation against external threats. It also raised awareness among Malaysians about the ongoing security challenges in Sabah, particularly regarding unresolved territorial claims. The incident affected local residents who had to endure threats to their safety and economic instability caused by the crisis.

In this context, film plays an important role in conveying and educating the public on historical events. As mentioned earlier, film is not merely a form of entertainment, but also an effective tool for education and information dissemination. Through film, true stories such as the Lahad Datu incursion can be portrayed visually, making them more accessible to the general audience. Viewers

not only gain an understanding of the historical background, but also empathise with the emotions and challenges faced by everyone who was affected by the true event. *Conquer: Lahad Datu* can be considered as one such example. This action-packed film was directed by Zulkarnain Azhar, who also co-wrote the screenplay with Peter Toyat. Produced by Keoh Chee Ang and Datuk Steven Lim, the film features Malaysian popular actors such as Syafiq Kyle, Kamal Adli, Fikry Ibrahim and Anding Indrawani who played members of the Malaysian security forces (Maliah Surip, 2024). *Conquer: Lahad Datu* not only presents dramatic battle scenes, but also showcases military strategies and sacrifices in a critical situation.

Films adapted from real historical events can become reference material, particularly for younger generations who did not directly experience the events. When crafted with care and backed by thorough research, films can serve as powerful mediums for preserving history and delivering impactful messages. *Conquer: Lahad Datu* is one such film, aiming to emphasise the importance of defending Malaysia's sovereignty. Such productions not only evoke national pride, but also raise awareness about real and ongoing security challenges. A well-executed, fact-driven narrative can provide the audience with insight into Malaysia's complex geopolitical realities and the continuous efforts required to maintain peace and stability.

Global film industries have used cinema to highlight their defence narratives; films such as *Black Hawk Down*, *Dunkirk* and *Zero Dark Thirty* have portrayed their countries' military experiences with both intensity and reverence (Johnson, 2023; Hill-Parks, 2004). Similarly, *Conquer: Lahad Datu* stands as Malaysia's contribution to this genre, focusing on the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion with a respectful lens on the heroes who stood up to the occasion. By blending historical accuracy with compelling storytelling, the film pays tribute to those who served, informs the public about real-world threats and reinforces the importance of unity in the face of crisis. It is also a showcase of the courage and strategic capabilities of Malaysia's security forces in defending the nation.

Beyond its cinematic appeal, *Conquer: Lahad Datu* offers a stark and vivid portrayal of the broader security landscape in Southeast Asia. Based on real events, it resonates not with the local audience but also potentially with the global audience by showing facts on the significance of political stability and regional security. The film raises awareness of the threats still faced in the region today, which include cross-border incursions, maritime piracy and unresolved territorial disputes. The Lahad Datu incursion stands as a critical moment in Malaysian history, a reminder not only of a breach in national security but of deeper geopolitical

tensions (Jelani Hamdan et al., 2023). Through such films, viewers gain a more profound understanding of these issues while engaging with a narrative that is both meaningful and thought provoking. It is more than entertainment—a reflection on sacrifice, perseverance and the collective strength that ensures a nation’s resilience for generations to come. Hence, the objectives of this study are to examine the plot or storyline presented in the film *Conquer: Lahad Datu* (2024) and to analyse the main elements portrayed in the adaptation of the film.

Background of the Study

Conquer: Lahad Datu is a film adaptation based on the real-life militant incursion that took place in Lahad Datu, Sabah, in 2013. As a narrative based on actual events, the film highlights the courage and sacrifices of Malaysia’s security forces in their defence of the nation. However, just as many adaptations, certain aspects of the story have been presented differently to serve creative and cinematic needs, which is a common practice in adapted works (Hutcheon, 2006). These narrative adjustments offer an enrichment for academic inquiry, particularly in examining how such changes influence historical storytelling and shape the psychological and emotional responses of viewers.

This study utilises content analysis to explore how the adaptation choices of *Conquer: Lahad Datu* impact audience interpretations, historical understanding and the emotional resonance of the film. Content analysis is used as the central method to examine adapted elements such as themes, plot structures, character representations, settings and language used in the film. The study also investigates how this film adaptation has shaped public perceptions of the actual 2013 incursion and how it contributes to fostering patriotism and national consciousness.

Nevertheless, the adaptation raises important questions about the issue of “fidelity” to the real events. Due to legal and ethical considerations, the filmmakers were unable to use the actual names of individuals involved and had to alter several narrative components. This has prompted concerns about how closely the film aligns with historical reality. These concerns form a core part of the study’s research problem, which seeks to assess the extent to which the adapted content preserves or distorts the historical facts and how the audience responds to this creative freedom. In addition, the inclusion of Sabah’s local cultural elements in the film is examined as a meaningful layer that contributes to the narrative and national identity construction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To examine how *Conquer: Lahad Datu* adapts a real historical event, it is important to consider existing studies on the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion, particularly those that explore its political and cultural dimensions. Researchers have analysed issues such as the territorial claims over Sabah by the Sulu Sultanate and the subsequent strain on Malaysia–Philippines relations (Raiham Mohd Sanusi, 2020). At the same time, research on film adaptation has explored how filmmakers create balance between historical accuracy and creative interpretation to produce compelling narratives. This section draws on both strands of literature to provide a foundational context for understanding the film portrayal of the Lahad Datu incursion, positioning it within broader conversations on historical representation and cinematic adaptation.

As discussed in Nur Elaneez Erdeena Mohd Hanizam et al.’s article (2019), the Lahad Datu incursion marked a turning point in Malaysia’s national security history. The study includes insights from an interview with Suhaire bin Shariff, a soldier who participated in *Operasi Daulat* that resulted in the deaths of 56 militants, six civilians and 10 Malaysian security personnel, while many intruders were either captured or fled to the Philippines. The article outlines the historical significance of Lahad Datu as a key district in Sabah with longstanding ties to the Sulu Sultanate. It also discusses the Philippines’ claim over Sabah, which is rooted in the legacy of the Sulu Sultanate and contrasts it with Malaysia’s position that sovereignty was relinquished to Spain in 1878. The informant recounts his experiences during *Operasi Daulat*, highlighting the intensity of the conflict, the atmosphere of continuous fear and the significant deployment of military resources. The article offers a detailed timeline of the incursion, covering events from February 9 to March 22, 2013, including the militants’ arrival, failed negotiation efforts, outbreaks of violence and the eventual formation of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM). The study concluded that the incursion exposed significant vulnerabilities in Malaysia’s security infrastructure and highlighted the importance of strengthening both national defence and diplomatic engagement to prevent similar incidents in the future. It also calls for heightened public awareness and appreciation for the peace and stability that Malaysia enjoys, offering valuable insights for scholars investigating the broader implications of the Lahad Datu incursion.

Zarina Othman et al. (2016) identified several factors that contributed to the 2013 incursion. Among these are Sabah’s geostrategic location and its extensive maritime borders with the Philippines, which made it vulnerable to unauthorised entry. The study also noted the lack of adequate security personnel and resources, the involvement of local individuals with Suluk ancestry and ties to the Kiram

family, and the initial failure of authorities to detect the intrusion, as the perpetrators went in using disguises, including elderly individuals and women. These findings revealed critical gaps in Malaysia's early response and formed part of the broader discussion on national security preparedness. The incursion exposed vulnerabilities in Malaysia's defence structure, as it went unnoticed until reported by the locals. Consequently, Malaysia established ESSCOM on March 16, 2013, to enhance eastern border security. The incursion strained Malaysia–Philippines diplomatic relations, though the Philippine government denied involvement and then-President Benigno Aquino sought a peaceful resolution. Domestic issues in Sabah, such as illegal immigration, maritime threats and overlapping territorial claims with the Philippines and Indonesia, were also mentioned as ongoing challenges to Malaysia. The article emphasised the need for improved security measures, regional cooperation and resolution of historical claims to safeguard Malaysia's sovereignty and stability, particularly given Sabah's economic significance such as its palm oil industry, cocoa tourism and strategic location.

The study conducted by Siti Nur Izra Safra' Abdul Halim et al. (2023) examines the historical accuracy and creative process of the 2022 film adaptation *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*, directed by renowned Malaysian film producer, Syamsul Yusuf. The film was inspired by the Malay historical figure known as Mat Kilau, who resisted the British colonial rule in Pahang. Despite achieving box office success with a collection of RM90 million within 33 days, the film and the production faced criticism from academics for historical inaccuracies. The study's analysis, which was based on Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, compared the film's depiction of characters, events and culture to historical sources. The study concluded that the film's creative process involved transformation, expansion, existence and modification of historical elements, which contributed to its historical inaccuracies. By referencing texts such as *Sejarah Pahang* (1972), the filmmakers adapted historical content to suit contemporary storytelling needs, prioritising narrative appeal over strict historical fidelity. The application of intertextuality reveals how the film reinterprets Mat Kilau's legacy, blending historical inspiration with creative freedoms.

Another study examined the adaptation of an old Malay literary text titled *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* into a 2011 epic film produced by KRU Studios. In the research article by Mohamed Nazreen Shahul Hamid and Md. Salleh Yaapar (2015), Desmond and Hawkes' adaptation theory was used to compare narrative elements (plot, character, setting, writing style and themes) between the original text and the film to identify similarities, differences and adaptation methods employed by the screenwriter and director. The study concluded that

the loose adaptation implemented in the film adaptation of *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* prioritises logical storytelling and commercial appeal over fidelity to the original text, thus reducing its historical and cultural essence. Despite this, the film successfully showcases the Malay film industry's capabilities and promotes traditional literature, though it is deficient in "obediently" capturing the text's sense of grandeur. The researchers also advocated for more adaptations of Malay classical works to preserve cultural heritage, drawing inspiration from Hollywood's approach to classic literature.

Sudirman Kiffli and Nurul Afini Roslin Mohd Saufi (2021) examined the adaptation process of a 2017 Malaysian film titled *Tombiruo: Penunggu Rimba*. The film was based on a novel of the same title by Ramlee Awang Murshid. Utilising Hutcheon's adaptation theory, the study focused on four key elements, namely the source and method of adaptation, purpose of adaptation, target audience and the context. The study concluded that the four key elements from the original novel were successfully incorporated into the film, resulting in an emotionally resonant and engaging adaptation. It also points to the need for further exploration of Malaysian adaptation films, highlighting their potential to enrich literary scholarship and elevate local cultural narratives on a global stage.

As outlined in the preceding discussion, the reviewed literature provides a comprehensive understanding of both the historical importance of the Lahad Datu incursion and the evolving landscape of film adaptation in Malaysia. The incursion stands not only as a critical stage in the country's security history, but also as a reflection of broader geopolitical complexities and cultural discourses. Analyses of other Malaysian film adaptations such as *Mat Kilau*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* and *Tombiruo* demonstrate how filmmakers navigate the tension between historical fidelity and creative freedom to create stories that resonate with contemporary audiences. These films underscore the power of adaptation as a medium for national storytelling, preserving cultural heritage while shaping public memory. However, while existing studies have examined Malaysian film adaptations rooted in legend, literature or colonial resistance, there is a noticeable gap in scholarly attention towards cinematic portrayals of contemporary, politically sensitive events, especially those involving current national security threats, such as the Lahad Datu incursion. *Conquer: Lahad Datu* represents one of the first major attempts to depict such a recent and emotional episode on screen. Yet, no academic analysis has been conducted on how this film adapts historical reality into narrative form. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by critically examining the film's adaptation strategies through the lens of Hutcheon's adaptation theory, with particular attention to how the film interprets sensitive historical facts.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs content analysis to examine the narrative elements presented in the film *Conquer: Lahad Datu* (2024). Content analysis is suitable for understanding how specific aspects of the film, such as plot, characters, themes and cinematic techniques, are structured and portrayed to achieve narrative and artistic objectives. The study focuses on elements within the film adaptation, with a particular emphasis on how it depicts the actual incursion that took place in Kampung Tanduo, Lahad Datu, in 2013.

As a theoretical foundation, this study adopts Hutcheon's adaptation theory (Hutcheon, 2006). This theory provides a framework for evaluating how the historical, social and cultural elements of an actual event are adapted and translated into a film's visual and narrative form. In conducting the content analysis, this study examines several key components highlighted throughout the film, including the plot, character development and themes.

Adaptation Theory (Hutcheon, 2006)

The process of adaptation is a form of interpretation and transformation of an artistic or literary work from one medium to another. Adaptation is not considered a copy or reproduction of the original work—rather, it is a restructuring of information (usually of a story) that involves changes and adjustments to suit the context of a new medium, such as film, theatre, video game and the like. Despite potential changes in theme, narrative structure, characters and other elements, an adaptation work still maintains a “connection” between the original and the new presentation in certain ways. Nevertheless, the adaptation is not considered “indebted to” or obligated to closely resemble the original work, as the adapter has the freedom to create based on their own creativity and interpretation (Hutcheon, 2006). An adapted work is a standalone creative product with an identity distinct from its source material. Several key points about adaptation as presented by Hutcheon (2006) are as follows:

Interpretation and Transformation

Adaptation is not merely the act of copying or duplicating an original work, but is more about interpreting and transforming based on an existing work. It involves modifying the original in ways that fit a new medium or context. Each adaptation aims to convey something different to its audience. This process adds new value and dimensions to the original story or theme.

Fidelity and Infidelity

Although an adaptation is not bound to remain faithful to its source, the adapter must still consider the value of fidelity in the new work. This aspect is often discussed in adaptation discourse. Modifications and changes made during the adaptation process should incorporate new elements and should not neglect the essence or “soul” of the original work.

Multidimensional Process

Adaptation is also considered as a multidimensional process—it is not only a shift from one medium to another (e.g., from a book to a film), but also changes in other aspects such as narrative structure, style and storytelling approach. Furthermore, adaptation can take many forms beyond the commonly seen book-to-film transition. This includes music, comics, theme parks, video games and more.

Declaration or Acknowledgement of Adaptation

Works based on existing content are typically labelled as “an adaptation of,” so the audience is aware of the rework version. This declaration is usually made on promotional posters or at either the opening or closing montage of the adapted work.

Commercialisation

Most adaptations are made for commercial purposes. Commercialisation often makes adaptations more widely available and accessible to a broader audience. Adaptation also opens opportunities for new artistic and creative exploration within the adapted work.

Cultural and Historical Phenomenon

Adaptation should not be seen only as a creative process, but also as a cultural and historical phenomenon. This involves the ways in which certain parties engage with and reinterpret stories based on cultural and historical values as well as specific motivations. The success or relevance of an adaptation varies depending on its social and historical context, which in turn influences how the original work is perceived.

Adaptation involves transferring a story from one form to another, entailing changes to elements such as themes, characters and events to make it suitable for a new medium. This process often includes structural adjustments such as shortening or expanding the storyline as well as shifting perspectives and focus to suit the

duration and format of the chosen media, such as film, drama or theatre (Nur Yuhanis Nasir et al., 2024). The adaptation process demands creativity in crafting the story to remain relevant to the target audience and to present its elements in a new form, with specific attention to audiovisual features that could enhance the audience's experience.

The purpose of adaptation varies depending on the adapter, who may aim for profit, cultural exchange, personal interest or political objectives. Additionally, adaptation allows for the transformation of an original work within different cultural and temporal contexts, in alignment with the target audience. Each medium, such as text or film, has its own unique storytelling method that shapes how the audience engages with the content. This process requires attention to the prevailing social, cultural and technological contexts and the adapter's ability to transform the work in a way that is acceptable and meaningful to the audience in the chosen format.

The adaptation process can be carried out through several approaches such as retaining the original story; removing elements deemed less important, irrelevant or insignificant or adding new elements to the new version (Hutcheon, 2006).

These are common practices in adaptation (Saputra, 2009; Stam, 2005) due to the different characteristics of the chosen medium of presentation. For example, stories in book form allow readers to use their imagination to construct imagery of the narrative in their minds. On the other hand, audiovisual forms such as films, dramas or stage performances are meant for viewing, thus limiting the audience's imagination because all story elements are visually presented based on the creativity of the director or adapter. However, visual adaptations still provide strong emotional impact as they stimulate both audio and visual senses, enriching the audience's viewing experience.

In summary, Hutcheon's adaptation theory reflects the complex and dynamic nature of the adaptation process itself. Adaptation is not simply about copying the original into a new medium; it involves change, interpretation, creativity and interaction between the audience, culture and historical context. The resulting adapted work is a new creation that stands on its own, yet still connects to its source in ways that add new layers of meaning for the audience.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The film *Conquer: Lahad Datu* briefly depicts the invasion of a militant group in a territory known as Batu Jugar. This territory is claimed by the militants who believe it to be ancestral land that was seized by the government. The group refers to themselves as the Nusantara Militant Movement (GMN), led by Raja Iskandar

(Raja Paduka GMN). Raja Iskandar, along with his son Raja Ilham and several other followers, are determined to seize and conquer the territory of their claim. Datuk Mizan and Senior Assistant Commissioner (SAC) Kamal from the Intelligence Unit attempt peaceful negotiations with Raja Iskandar. However, negotiations break down after Raja Iskandar makes a series of demands, including a sum of 800 million (unspecified currency), full control over Batu Jugar territory and the surrender of governmental authority to GMN. They also urge national security forces to withdraw from the area. These demands are rejected by the government. The attack begins after Raja Iskandar discovers that the village residents within the territory have been evacuated by the national security forces for safety purposes. Both sides clash in the palm oil plantation and in Kampung Air. Continuous assaults force the Malaysian forces to retreat due to heavy casualties and injuries among their personnel. The Malaysian forces later conduct intelligence operations to plan a counterattack aimed to end the incursion. This is intensified through air, land and sea operations. Fierce battles in Kampung Air lead to the deaths of many militants, while hostages from the local villages are successfully rescued. In the end, Raja Iskandar manages to escape and flee the Batu Jugar territory.

As a film based on an actual historically significant event in Malaysia, *Conquer: Lahad Datu* required a variety of scenes deemed appropriate to the setting while still adhering to guidelines recommended by certain authorities. Table 1 summarises the actual chronology of the event and narrative as portrayed in the film. Data on the actual Lahad Datu incursion were sourced from credible outlets, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, UMNO Online, Sinar Harian and BERNAMA Radio, providing a factual baseline for comparison with the film's narrative.

The film retains the core elements of the 2013 incursion—the militant attack in Kampung Tanduo and the Malaysian security forces' response—aligning with Hutcheon's principle of preserving the source story's essence (Hutcheon, 2006). For instance, the depiction of *Operasi Daulat*, including coordinated air, land and sea assaults, mirrors the historical counteroffensive launched on March 5, 2013. This fidelity ensures that the film anchors its narrative in historical reality, enabling the audience to connect with the bravery and sacrifices of the Malaysian Armed Forces and Royal Malaysia Police. However, the film employs a flash-forward scene of a battle in a palm oil plantation to open the narrative—a creative choice that deviates from the chronological progression of the actual events. This technique, while effective in generating suspense, risks reframing the incursion as a singular, action-driven conflict, potentially overshadowing the

protracted diplomatic efforts that preceded the violence, such as the negotiations between Malaysia and the Philippines that happened from February 16–26, 2013.

Table 1 Comparison of the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion and its portrayal in *Conquer: Lahad Datu*.

Chronology of Actual Incursion	Plot in <i>Conquer: Lahad Datu</i>
<p>The intrusion occurred from February 3–11, 2013. During this period, the intruders entered Sabah in small groups via sea routes using fishing boats to avoid detection by the authorities.</p>	<p>The film opens with a terrorist attack scene. A battle between security forces and militants takes place in a palm oil plantation. This is a flash-forward scene possibly used by the director to create suspense. The audience is then introduced to key characters as the story unfolds. The film also highlights the family values of the main characters.</p>
<p>February 12, 2013: The intruders split into smaller groups and hid in the home of Ahmad Maladi (Mad Bon).</p>	<p>The scene then shifts to the militants' base. Raja Iskandar delivers a rousing speech to his followers, urging them to reclaim the Batu Jugar territory.</p>
<p>February 14, 2013: Authorities confirmed that one of the intruders was a loyal follower of the Sulu Crown Prince Azzimudie Kiram.</p>	<p>February 26 (unspecified year): The intrusion begins when Datuk Khairil receives a phone call from the Batu Jugar Commissioner, reporting the presence of militants in the territory.</p>
<p>February 16, 2013: The intruders presented a territorial claim over Sabah. The Malaysian and Philippine governments sought diplomatic solutions to avoid bloodshed.</p>	<p>The VAT69 Commandos and Royal Malaysia Police discuss deploying forces to Batu Jugar to negotiate with the militants. Upon arrival, the VAT69 team prepares to escort appointed officers to negotiate with Raja Iskandar.</p>
<p>February 24, 2013: The Philippine government sent 180 humanitarian aid workers to Sabah.</p>	<p>SAC Kamal and Datuk Mizan meet Raja Iskandar at the GMN base. Raja Iskandar presents several demands to the government.</p>
<p>February 26, 2013: Deadline for the intruders to leave Sabah expired, but peace negotiations continued. However, it was unsuccessful.</p>	<p>The negotiation is paused while SAC Kamal states that the demands will be reviewed. The second meeting at the GMN base becomes tense after the government rejects the demands. Meanwhile, Raja Iskandar learns that the security forces have evacuated local villagers for their safety.</p>

Chronology of Actual Incursion	Plot in <i>Conquer: Lahad Datu</i>
March 1, 2013: Kampung Tanduo was attacked by the intruders. Two security personnel were killed and three were wounded.	
March 2, 2013: An ambush in Kampung Sri Jaya Simunul (a water village), Semporna, resulted in the deaths of six security personnel and six militants.	
March 3, 2013: Security reinforcements arrived to rescue 19 security personnel.	
March 5, 2013: Operasi Daulat was launched using F18 and Hawk fighter jets against the intruders in Kampung Tanduo. Firefight occurred in Kampung Tanjung Batu, Lahad Datu. The Sabah Police Commissioner stated that a blockade was being enforced by air and sea to cut off supplies to the militants.	The failure of peaceful negotiations leads to a series of battles. Fighting at the palm oil plantation and Kampung Air results in casualties among security forces, forcing them to retreat to prevent further losses. Meanwhile, intelligence units conduct surveillance in Kampung Air to rescue trapped personnel and plan a full-scale counterattack.
March 7, 2013: By 7:00 pm, 52 militants were killed in Lahad Datu and Semporna.	
April 10, 2013: The security forces declared that the conflict was over. The Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) was established to prevent future intrusions and secure Sabah's east coast. Operasi Daulat was replaced with Operation Sanggah.	The plot intensifies as security forces launch a coordinated assault via sea, air, and land. The counterattack leads to the defeat of many militants, and Raja Iskandar manages to escape. Hostages, mostly civilians, are rescued. This plot closely reflects the real events, where the militant leader remains at large despite the end of attacks.
Diplomatic collaboration between Malaysia and the Philippines continue to prevent similar future incursions.	

In line with Hutcheon's concept of omission, the film excludes complex historical details, such as the Sulu Sultanate's territorial claims and the broader Malaysia–Philippines geopolitical tensions. These omissions streamline the

narrative for cinematic coherence, focusing on the immediate conflict and its resolution. However, this selective exclusion raises critical questions about the film's representation of history. By sidelining the Sulu Sultanate's historical context, the film may inadvertently simplify the incursion as an isolated act of aggression, potentially limiting audience understanding of the longstanding territorial disputes in Sabah. This aligns with Hutcheon's (2006) observation that adaptations often prioritise narrative accessibility over comprehensive historical accuracy.

The addition of fictional elements—such as the characters of Raja Iskandar and Raja Ilham and locations such as Batu Jugar and Kampung Air—exemplifies Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as a transformative process. These creative additions serve practical and ethical purposes, avoiding the use of real names to mitigate political sensitivities and potential legal issues. For example, Raja Iskandar, the fictional leader of GMN, stands in for the actual figure Azzimudie Kiram, preserving the narrative's antagonist structure while distancing from specific individuals. Similarly, the use of standard Malay language (*bahasa Melayu*) instead of Sabah dialect broadens the film's accessibility to a national audience but risks diluting the cultural specificity of the Lahad Datu region. This tension reflects Hutcheon's (2006) discussion of fidelity and infidelity, where adaptations must navigate the balance between honouring the source and adapting it for a new context. While these changes enhance the film's commercial viability and narrative clarity, they may compromise the authenticity of local voices and perspectives, particularly for the Sabah audience who lived through the 2013 incursion.

The film's emotional resonance is amplified through its depiction of battle scenes in the palm oil plantation and Kampung Air, which emphasise the courage and sacrifice of security forces. These sequences align with Hutcheon's emphasis on the emotional dimension of adaptation, as they evoke a visceral response, fostering patriotism and national pride. For instance, the portrayal of peace negotiations between Datuk Mizan, SAC Kamal and Raja Iskandar introduces a dramatic subplot that underscores the Malaysian forces' commitment to diplomacy before resorting to violence. However, the film's focus on action-driven sequences and heroic narratives risks overshadowing the broader socio-political implications of the incursion, such as its impact on local communities and regional security dynamics. A more critical engagement with these elements could have enriched the film's portrayal of the event's complexity, aligning with Hutcheon's view of adaptation as a multidimensional process that engages cultural and historical contexts.

Table 1 compares the historical chronology with the film's narrative, highlighting both fidelity and creative divergence. While the film accurately captures key events, such as the failure of peace negotiations and the escalation of violence, the timeline was compressed (omitting the prolonged infiltration from February 3–11, 2013) and introduces fictional demands, such as the GMN's request for 800 million (unspecified currency). These alterations enhance dramatic tension but may obscure the diplomatic intricacies of the actual event. Furthermore, the film's conclusion, where Raja Iskandar escapes, mirrors the historical ambiguity surrounding the militant leader's fate, reinforcing the narrative's connection to reality while leaving room for creative interpretation.

CONCLUSION

The film adaptation *Conquer: Lahad Datu* (2024) serves as a compelling case study in the application of Hutcheon's adaptation theory (2006), demonstrating the intricate balance between fidelity to historical source material and the creative demands of filmmaking. By retaining core elements of the 2013 Lahad Datu incursion, such as the militant attack in Kampung Tanduo and the Malaysian security forces' counteroffensive, the film anchors its narrative in historical reality, ensuring that the audience engages with the event's significance as a moment of national resilience. Simultaneously, the strategic omission of complex historical details streamlines the narrative to enhance its accessibility and emotional resonance. The incorporation of fictional elements, including characters such as Raja Iskandar and locations such as Batu Jugar, further exemplifies Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as a transformative process that reinterprets the source material to suit the aesthetic and ethical constraints of the cinematic medium.

These adaptive strategies effectively balance historical fidelity with cinematic appeal, fostering a sense of patriotism and raising public awareness of Malaysia's security challenges. The film's emphasis on the bravery and sacrifices of the Malaysian Armed Forces and Royal Malaysia Police aligns with Hutcheon's (2006) assertion that adaptation can amplify emotional engagement, thereby strengthening audience connections to historical narratives. By foregrounding themes of national unity and resilience, *Conquer: Lahad Datu* contributes to the cultivation of a collective national identity, particularly for younger generations who may lack direct experience of the 2013 incursion.

The film's success in translating a pivotal moment in Malaysia's history into a commercially viable and emotionally resonant narrative highlights the potential of cinema as a medium for historical education and cultural preservation. *Conquer: Lahad Datu* demonstrates how adaptations can serve as both artistic creations and historical artefacts, bridging the gap between factual accuracy and creative interpretation. To fully realise the educational potential of historical adaptations, future Malaysian films could adopt a more inclusive approach by integrating diverse perspectives, such as those of local residents, and employing cinematic techniques that foreground the sociocultural and political complexities of historical events.

In a broader context, *Conquer: Lahad Datu* contributes to the evolving landscape of Malaysian cinema, which has historically favoured adaptations of popular novels over historical narratives. By tackling a relatively recent and sensitive event, the film sets a precedent for history-based storytelling that can enrich public discourse and foster a deeper appreciation for Malaysia's geopolitical challenges.

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