



BILLION DOLLAR QUESTION

Where is Jho Low? In *Man on the Run*, director Cassius Michael Kim uncovers key narratives behind the high-profile fugitive financier's orchestration of the 1MDB case.

BY EMILY YAP + DIAN PASQUINAL KAUR

Dubbed one of the greatest financial scandals in history, the 1MDB imbroglio assailed the senses of the entire country in 2015, when the people of Malaysia learnt they had been swindled out of billions of dollars. At the heart of this exploitation lies the fugitive Low Taek Jho (better known as Jho Low), who perpetrated the brazen scheme with a group of co-conspirators and lavishly squandered state funds on property, paintings and parties.

In *Man on the Run*, key individuals involved in the case and its exposure tell their side of the story. They include former director of PetroSaudi International Xavier Justo, who first leaked information of the scandal; *Sarawak Report* founder and investigative journalist Clare Rewcastle Brown, who was tipped off; Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who was then leader of the opposition; and the kleptocratic ex-PM Datuk Seri Najib Razak, now jailed for his complicity in the embezzlement.

US-based director Cassius Michael Kim, who also acts as the documentary's writer and executive producer, talks about the revelations he was privy to while filming.



Cassius Michael Kim

Options: What inspired you to make this documentary?

Cassius Michael Kim: What motivated me to tell this story, beyond the massive scope of the fraud, was how little it is known in America. Despite coverage by some of the biggest newspapers in the country and being featured in a bestselling book, embroiling people in some of the most high-profile sectors in the world (Hollywood, Wall Street, the Middle East and so on), most people in America have no idea what the 1MDB saga represents.

On top of that, even though dozens, if not hundreds, of people benefited from the scandal and aided and enabled Jho Low and his co-conspirators, very few have been held accountable. For a journalist and documentary filmmaker, it's a dream of a confluence of circumstances.

Man on the Run sheds light on the extensive corruption and greed behind the 1MDB case. What do you hope viewers will take away from your documentary?

Why do these things keep happening? Throughout my lifetime, there has been one financial scandal after another where the wealthy take from those without, where grave inequality and injustice are perpetuated with no end in sight.

The conditions of late-stage capitalism, and a world where the accumulation of wealth is constantly deified over how we treat each other, will always promote money over reverence for our shared humanity. This is a paradigm that needs to change.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, were there any challenges you faced in gaining access to key individuals and information for your film?

The end of the film features a montage of responses (or lack thereof) from many notable figures of the 1MDB scandal that we reached out to, but could not secure participation. This is but a small sampling of the outreach we did. As with any story of this magnitude, the film we created relies heavily on those who did participate. That's just the nature of the medium, and I'm thankful to those who did decide to take part in the film.

Could you share some memorable moments during the filming and production of Man on the Run?

A significant highlight of the production was my time spent in Malaysia. Prior to *Man on the Run*, I did not know much about the country and had never visited. It was an honour to explore this country and meet so many of her people, in an effort to tell this story. I hope I was able to represent not just those who were involved in 1MDB, on both sides, but also the average Malaysian and how this saga affects them.

Were there any attempts to reach out to Jho Low's family or associates for their perspective or involvement in the documentary?

We made many efforts to contact Jho Low and his associates in the production of this documentary. We were stonewalled or met with silence at every turn. However, I hope that Low responds to my emails someday. It would be an interesting experience to speak with him.

How did you balance the narrative between the Malaysian government's involvement and Jho Low's actions in the documentary?

While Jho Low was the driving force behind the 1MDB scandal, it could not have been conducted without the complicity of those within the government, who benefited significantly from his crimes. The story can't be told without the other. We tried our best to highlight what we felt were significant moments in the narrative that could tell the most complete and nuanced story of the 1MDB saga, whether that was in regard to Jho Low's actions or the Malaysian government.



Behind-the-scenes stills of PM Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and ex-PM Datuk Seri Najib Razak

What was the most surprising or shocking revelation you came across while researching and making Man on the Run?

What truly surprised me about Jho Low was his apparent lack of long-term planning during the perpetuation of the 1MDB scam. There was almost no effort to make this a sustainable fraud but rather, all the money that came into the coffers was immediately stolen and spent. With even minimal effort, Low and his cronies could have papered over some of the missing funds with new funds to keep the scam going, but never did so. It speaks almost of nihilism in the way the fraud was conducted, which was difficult to understand. Second, I was very surprised when during the interview with former PM Datuk Seri Najib Razak, he admitted to receiving a copy of the warrant for his arrest prior to the 'Night of the Long Knives'.

If you could do it all over again, is there anything about the making of this documentary you would change?

While it would have been nice to have more time to work on it, I feel very fortunate to have filmed during the moment in time that we did. We were able to secure interviews with Najib before he was sent to prison, and current PM Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim when he was the leader of the opposition facing an uphill battle to regain power within government. Not to mention all those who were intimately involved in the uncovering of the fraud, and bringing some accountability to those implicated.

There's not much use in looking backwards, and I feel very grateful for the opportunities we got while making the film.

How different was the experience of working on Man on the Run compared with your other works?

My background in international production was a great help in coordinating the logistical elements of production. However, the scope of this story was beyond anything I had tackled before. That said, as a filmmaker, I'm always looking for new challenges and new stories to tell, and I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work on this project and tell this story.

What's keeping you busy these days and what's next?

We are currently actively seeking a long-term home for the film and hope to make an announcement soon. Aside from that, I am in development on a number of projects, both fiction and non-fiction, and hope to soon cross over into the narrative space after working on this great beast of a documentary subject.



Man on the Run premieres in cinemas on Oct 19