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Director's Note

The Asian Film Archive (AFA) was established in 2005. The National Library Board incorporated the National Archives of Singapore in March 2013, followed by the AFA in January 2014. The AFA serves as a repository for films from all over Asia. Many fine Asian films make their rounds on international festival circuits, winning critical acclaim and awards, but are often not released commercially. Without the preservation work of the AFA, these films – which are part of our Asian heritage and identity – might be forgotten or lost forever.

The AFA celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, having come a long way from its simple beginnings but always adhering to its mission "to save, explore and share the Art of Asian Cinema". In this issue, executive director of the AFA, Karen Chan, takes a look back at the AFA's first 10 years, sharing its vision and the challenges it faces in film archiving.

This year, the 19th South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association (SEAPA-VAA) Conference will be held in Singapore from 22 to 28 April, and is hosted by the National Library Board. We look forward to this significant meeting of representatives from film archive institutions from all over Asia.

This issue of *BiblioAsia* is aptly dedicated to the subject of film.

Few people are aware that cinema in Singapore has had a long history, dating as far back as 1896. Bonny Tan traces its development from the arrival of the Magic Lantern – the precursor of the modern cinema – to Singapore's earliest indigenous films: *Xin Ke* (1927, *The Immigrant*) and *Leila Majnun* (1934). After the lull period during the Japanese Occupation came the golden age of Malay cinema, from 1947 to 1972. This 25-year period gave rise to more than 250 films as well as local celebrity stars like P. Ramlee, Jins Shamsudin, Siput Sarawak and Maria Menado (of *Pontianak* movie fame), among others. Michelle Heng and Nor Afidah Abd Rahman examine the films and studios of this illustrious era.

Singapore has been an alluring set location for Western filmmakers since the early 1930s. Our guest writer Ben Slater looks at movies shot in Singapore over the years and examines foreign perceptions of Singapore that range from the seedy and the exotic to the mysterious and futuristic.

After the 1970s, local filmmaking again crawled to a standstill and remained so for the next two decades. Raphaël Millet discusses the resurgence of Singapore films from the 1990s to the present, looking through the lens of established auteurs such as Eric Khoo and Jack Neo as well as newer talents like Boo Junfeng, Anthony Chen and Ken Kwek.

Guest columnist and two-time film director Glen Goei mulls over his transition from the stage to the screen in "My Leap into Movies". His remake of *Pontianak* – an homage to the golden age of Malay film in Singapore – is currently in production and slated for release in 2017.

Also preserving memories from yesteryear is Wong Han Min, a collector of film-related memorabilia. He shares items such as old ticket stubs, posters, advertisements and other ephemera, giving us a glimpse into movie-going in the past. The older generation will remember buying cinema tickets with seat numbers scrawled in crayon; they will also recall those helpful ushers without whom many would have ended up stumbling in the dark and taking the wrong seat.

While commercial films have a successful track record in Singapore, art house movies have often struggled to find their footing. Gracie Lee examines the challenges faced by alternative films in "Culture on Celluloid".

We are lucky in Singapore to have hosted many film festivals and to enjoy easy access to numerous films from all over the globe. More than just entertainment, films open a window into different cultures and societies.

Ms Tay Ai Cheng
Deputy CEO
National Library Board

BiblioAsia is a free quarterly publication produced by the National Library Board. It features articles on the history, culture and heritage of Singapore within the larger Asian context, and has a strong focus on the collections and services of the National Library. BiblioAsia is distributed to local and international libraries, academic institutions, government ministries and agencies, as well as members of the public. The online edition of BiblioAsia is available at: http://www.nlb.gov.sg/Browse/ BiblioAsia.aspx

MY LEAP INTO MOVIES

Theatre thespian and film director Glen Goei reflects on his transition from the stage to cinema screen.

Film stills from *Forever Fever* (1998), starring Adrian Pang, Pierre Png, Anna Belle Francis and Medaline Tan. *Courtesy of Tiger Tiger Pictures.*
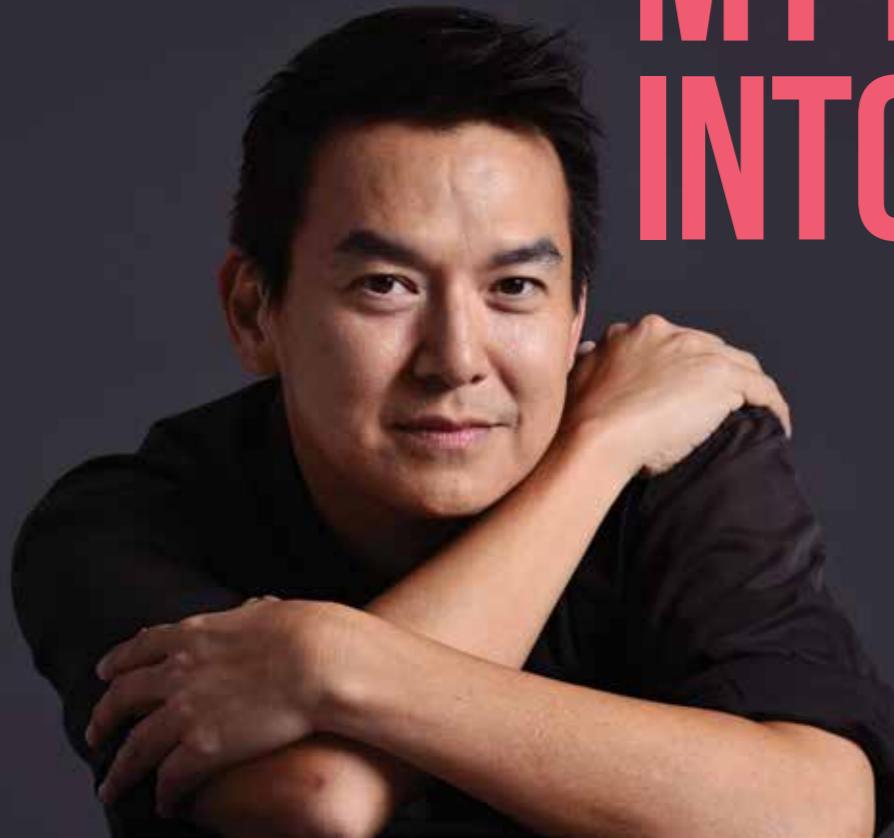
my first film, *Forever Fever*, was born out of a situation of sheer desperation. It was 1995, and I'd been living in the UK for nearly 15 years. I was a 32-year-old West End actor, had won a couple of awards as theatre director on the London stage, and had been running an Asian theatre company called Mu-Lan Arts for close to five years. It was after our fourth production – the staging of *Three Japanese Women* at London's Soho Theatre – that reality sunk in: the audience numbers were not increasing and the company's finances were dwindling. I grew despondent. Despite receiving awards and great reviews from the British media, there just wasn't sufficient demand for theatre with actors of Asian descent (or Orientals, as less informed Brits are wont to say).

Artistically frustrated, I left for New York to do a short course in film at New York University (NYU), where not unexpectedly, I was forced to think about possible storylines for films. On returning to London, I set out to produce a film based on Ming Cher's *Spider Boys*, a gritty novel about youth gangs in 1950s Singapore. Unfortunately, before filming could take place in 1997, the project fell through due to casting problems. Dejected but not defeated, I became more determined to make a film – no matter what the odds were.

The problem was I didn't have a script. I locked myself in my basement with a book on screenwriting and forced myself to write, never having written anything beyond academic essays at university. Miraculously, by the end of the month, I'd written the first draft: I had in my hands the makings of the film *Forever Fever*.

I packed a suitcase and headed home. When I returned to Singapore at the end of 1997 to make *Forever Fever*, the challenges were immense. What did I know about producing a film apart from that stint at NYU? My background was in theatre for goodness' sake. To make matters worse, the filmmaking scene in Singapore was practically nonexistent. The now defunct China Runn Pictures, which I'd engaged to co-produce *Forever Fever*, had previously only shot commercials and documentaries. What was I thinking?

I didn't know of any production company that worked solely in film. In desperation, I roped in friends for help, like actress Tan Kheng Hua, who became my casting director. There wasn't a large pool of talent around and she hired many fresh faces that audiences today have become familiar with.

Inexperience and a lack of resources posed critical problems to funding and budgeting. To make the film, I ended up mortgaging my apartment in London. I was stupidly naïve then, even paying huge copyright fees for the use of 10 pop songs. Fortunately, it was a risk that paid off. Harvey Weinstein from Miramax, who later picked up *Forever Fever* for an international release, said it was the music that allowed him to connect with the film. Fortunately, screenings in international audience markets ensured a healthy profit for *Forever Fever* – its local takings would not have come close to breaking even.
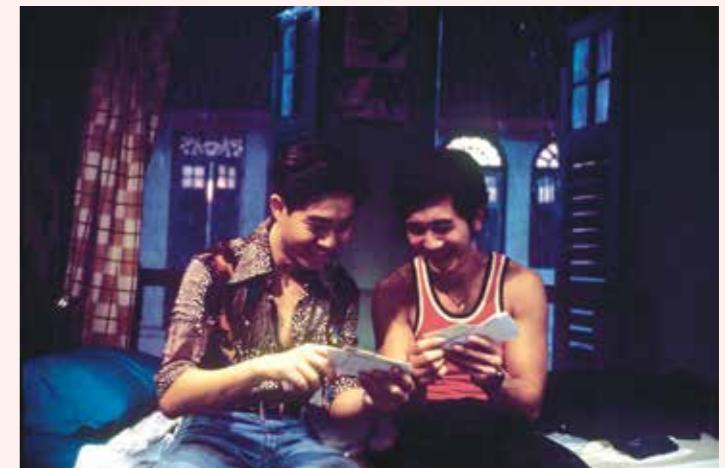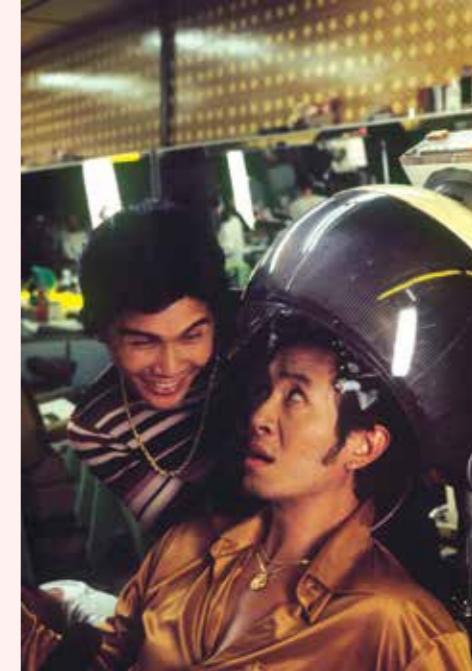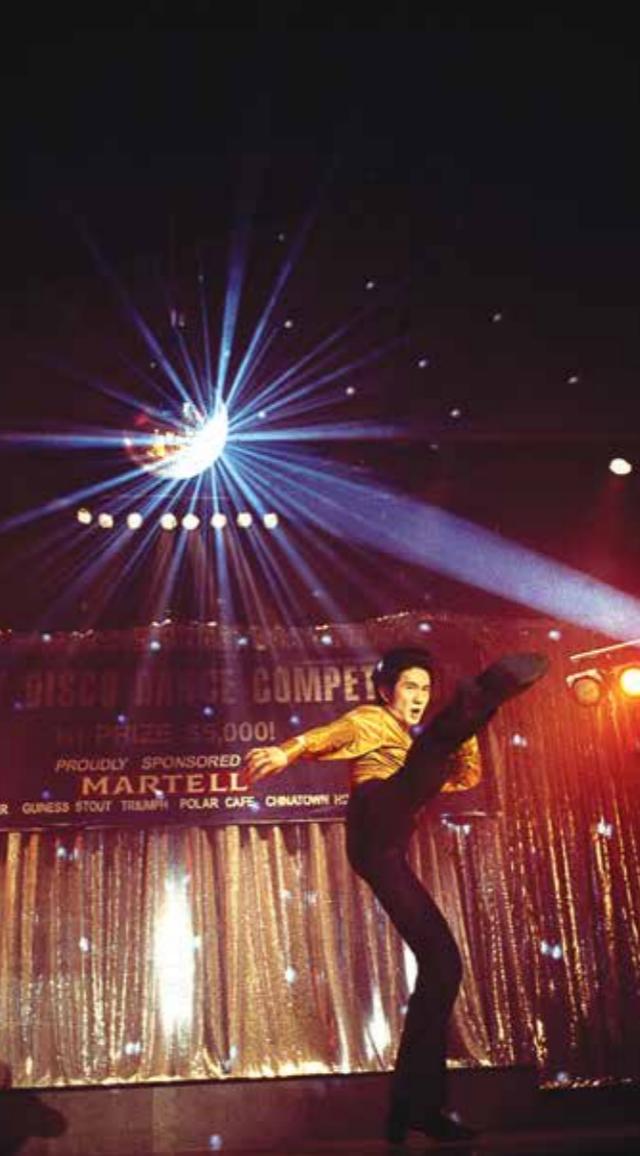
Eleven years later, when I made my second film *The Blue Mansion*, I wasn't as fortunate. I blew the budget and despite good reviews, the murder-mystery thriller set in Penang turned out to be a financial disaster at the box office. I lost all the money I had made on *Forever Fever*. Once again, I found it hard to find a producer who could handle the demands of a feature film. Local producers rarely have the opportunity to handle big budgets and shoot large-scale films. Truth be told, it's a chicken-and-egg situation: local films remain small because
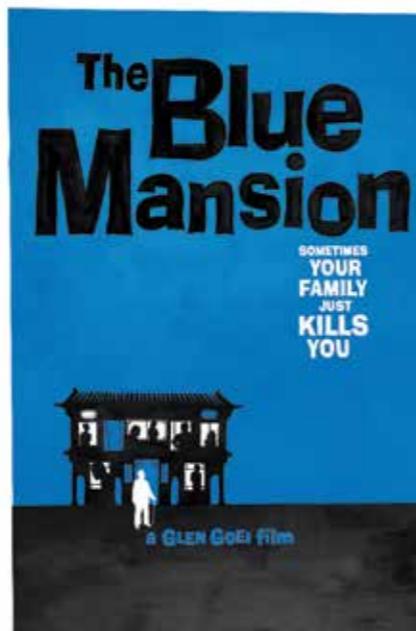
the market for them is small. I needed – and still need – producers who can handle the funding, the budgeting, and manage the scale and complexities of making a feature film; the demands are completely different from television.

I took a personal hit financially with *The Blue Mansion*, mainly because it failed to secure international distribution. At a foreign film market, I was told by a film executive in all seriousness that the film would sell better if it was in Chinese (I didn't know whether to laugh or cry). In fact, for both my films, I found there to be resistance among investors and distributors to the idea of Asians speaking English in a film. In its North American release, *Forever Fever* was dubbed over by American actors because of fears that audiences would not understand the Singaporean actors. Changing a film's language to pander to an audience market perplexes me. Shouldn't a film's marketability be based on its merits and not its language?

As a nation of immigrants, Singaporeans have no common language except for English; it has become our official lingua franca and our situation is unique for an Asian country. As a director, I make films about the Singapore I know – a Singapore where English or rather Singlish is primarily used as a means of communication. A significant majority of

(Facing page) The movie poster for Glen Goei's latest film, *Pontianak*, slated for release in 2017. *Courtesy of Tiger Tiger Pictures.*
(On this page) The Blue Mansion is a murder mystery starring Lim Kay Siu (top left and middle, extreme left), Claire Wong, Louisa Chong, Adrian Pang, Tan Kheng Hua and Karen Tan (middle from left to right), and the late Emma Yong (bottom). *Courtesy of Tiger Tiger Pictures.*

our population, however, converse in Chinese dialects in their homes. This is why Chinese films tend to do better at the domestic box office. I've recently started to source for funding for my next film *Pontianak*, and already, I've faced rejection for its language. A local production company (that will remain unnamed) has chosen not to invest in the film because it will be in Malay and does not feature any Chinese actors. The perceived financial risks are just too high.

My earliest memories of watching movies are of Malay films screened by Radio Television Singapore (RTS) in the 1960s and 70s. *Pontianak* is my homage to the Golden Age of filmmaking in Singapore and the highly successful string of iconic Pontianak films that were produced by Cathay-Keris and Shaw in the late 1950s. These movies were in Malay and were watched by many Singaporeans regardless of their race or the language they spoke. Society felt more diverse and embracing of other cultures back then, possibly because we were searching for an identity in post-World War II Singapore. To be true to the spirit of the original films and that period of our history, it is essential that my remake of *Pontianak* be filmed in Malay.

Our nation's films are visual documents of our culture, traditions, languages and history. We should learn to look at film as a cultural product and not an economic commodity with a price and a return on investment. We need to develop a culture of filmmaking and film appreciation in order to address this narrow view of this art form, and by extension, the difficulties of funding, developing and maintaining an industry. It is grossly reductive to say that we are a small market or a young country when there existed a thriving film industry in 1950s Singapore. One also only needs to look at Hong Kong, a city not much larger than Singapore, for proof of the potential possibilities.

To develop a culture of filmmaking, risks need to be taken by investors from both the public and private sectors, with the former leading the way. The Media Development Authority and the Singapore Film Commission have been established to promote film and to award grants to assist young filmmakers. Unfortunately, there is an institutionalised preference to fund films with commercial merit and to veer away from the untried or untested. In a country where the media is regulated, it is in theatre and film that an artist can – and should – have a voice. The importance of film goes beyond pure entertainment and profit. There must be institutional support for films in all the different genres. Only then might we have a chance at growing our film scene into the industry we dream of presently. ◆
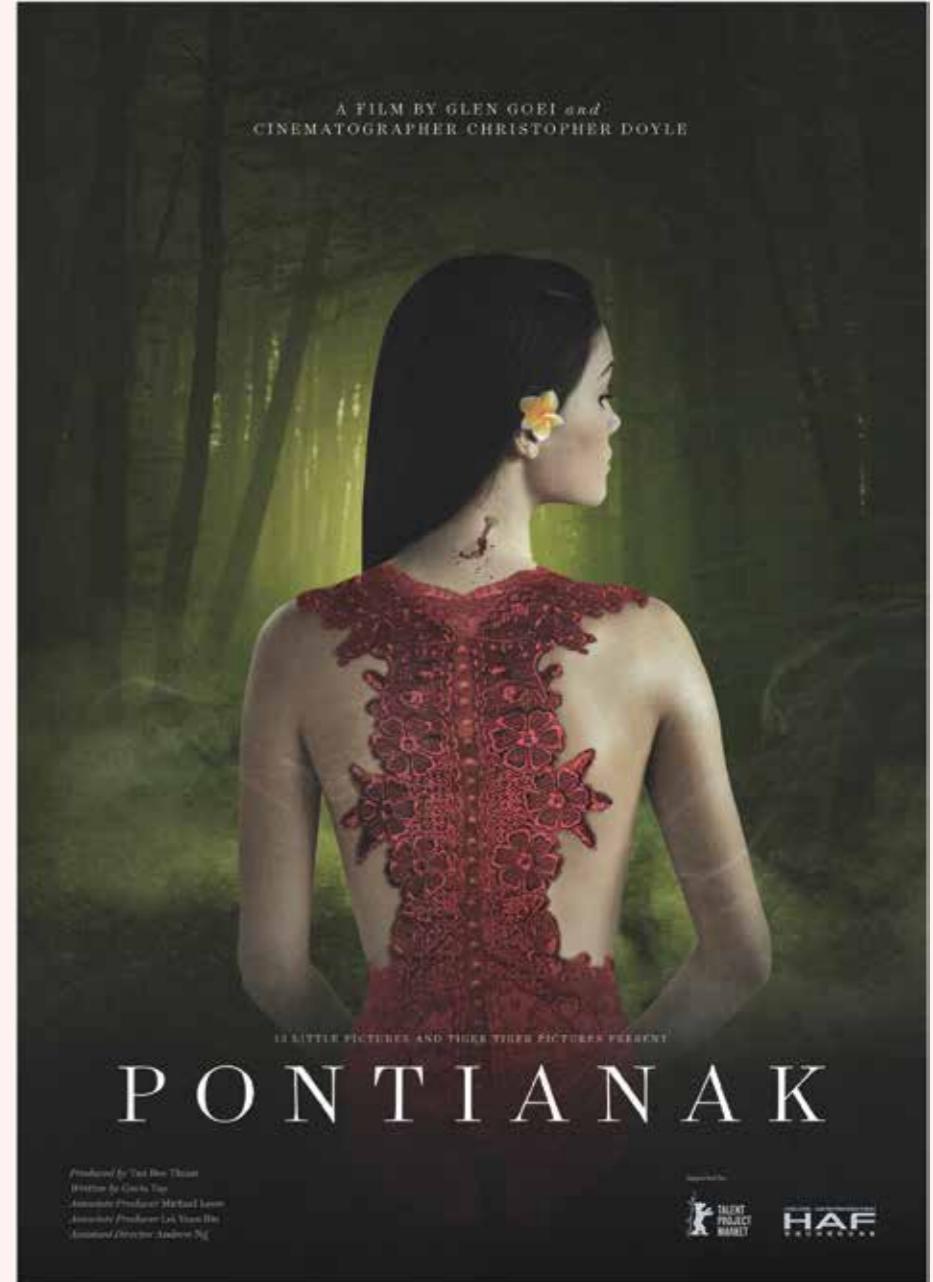
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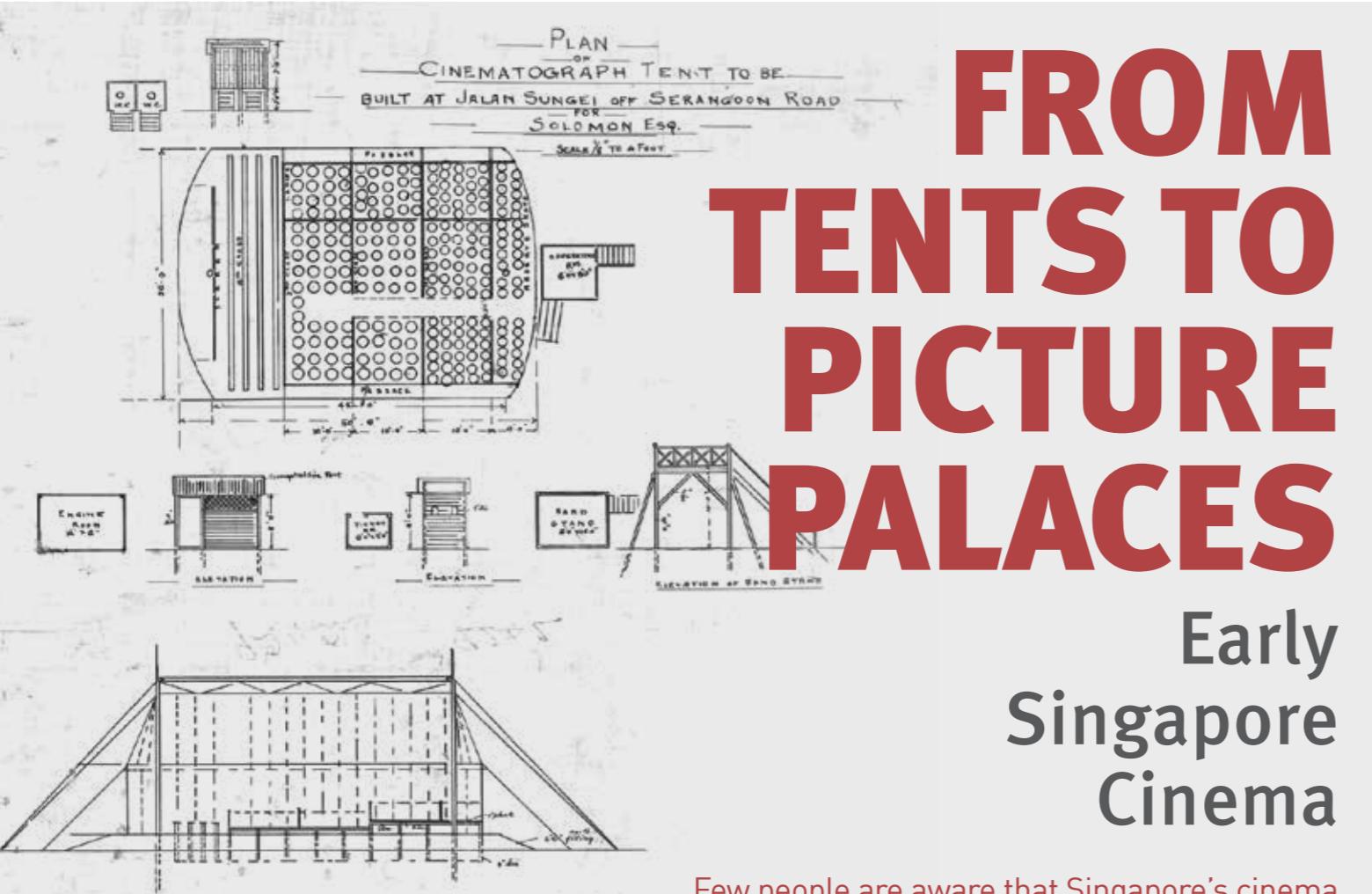
FROM TENTS TO PICTURE PALACES

Early Singapore Cinema

Few people are aware that Singapore's cinema history dates back to as early as 1896. **Bonny Tan** traces its development, from the days of the Magic Lantern projector to the first locally made films.

"All we can say to Singapore's pleasure-seekers is that if they do not like a couple of hours to hang heavily on their hands they could not do better than wend their steps to the Company's tent after dinner and feast their eyes on this unique and novel exhibition."

– "The Royal Cinematograph", *Eastern Daily Mail and Straits Morning Advertiser*, 20 February 1907

Singapore's first public film screening is often mistakenly attributed to Basrai, a travelling Parsi impresario who is believed to have shown the movie in April 1902 in a tent pitched at the junction of Hill Street and River Valley Road.[1] Archival newspaper reports, however, indicate that the April 1902 screening was organised by the American Biograph Company at the foot of Fort Canning along Hill Street.[2] But the real story of Singapore's film history movies predates this first public screening and is much richer than previously thought.

Bonny Tan is a Senior Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. Her interest in the history of films was sparked after she uncovered little known facets of colonial life in early newspapers of Singapore. She would like to thank Nadi Tofighian for his help in reviewing this article.

The First Film Experiences

When the cinema age descended on Singapore at the turn of the 19th century, its evening entertainment offerings were already varied. Europeans, dressed to the nines would head off for lavish dinner parties that continued until past 9pm.[3] They would then either play a round of cards or proceed to a theatrical performance that stretched late into the night. Locals, on the other hand, would gather in open-air spaces to watch Chinese opera, Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow pup-petry), or sit in rapt attention to *bangsawan*, a dance, music and drama performance that drew from the cultural heritage of the Arabs and adapted European tales into the local Malay language.[4]

The predecessor to the modern cinema was the Magic Lantern where images were projected and manipulated, either to tell a story or create an effect on stage. One of the earliest of such shows in Singapore was a phantasmagoria – which projected images of ghosts, spirits and other scary apparitions at the Theatre Royal by a Monsieur George in 1846.[5] By the 1880s, Magic Lantern shows were regularly screened as entertainment for military families,[6] in local churches for religious edification[7] and in schools for education.[8]

In 1896, the first experience of an animated image using American technology – the Kinetoscope – was brought to Singapore by Dr Harley, an illusionist. The Kinetoscope was a standing box where patrons, one at a time, could watch scenes ranging from dances to cock fights through a peephole viewer at the top of the box. Images were captured on celluloid and quickly run through a series of wheels by an electric motor, aided by an electric lamp shining through it, thus giving the impression of animation. Several Kinetoscope boxes were exhibited for several days in July 1896 at Messrs. Robinson's music store for a limited number of people.[9]

Just a year later, in May 1897, the Ripograph, better known as the Giant Cinematograph, was brought from Paris by a man named Arthur Sullivan who boldly advertised that the 10,000-dollar equipment projected "the largest life pictures in the world"[10] (it is likely that Sullivan exaggerated the cost and size of images for commercial advantage). This was less than two years after the first public screening of a movie in France by the Lumiere brothers in December 1895.[11] The Ripograph was described as "a mechanical arrangement of instantaneous photographs taken at about twenty to forty exposures per second on a fine continuous film and from what could be seen, it gives a very accurate picture of animate existence. The pictures, projected by a magic lantern on to a screen in front of those present, give a natural appearance to the scenes depicted."[12]

Meanwhile, new cinematographic inventions came fast and furious from the laboratories of Thomas Edison in America and the creative minds of the French, such as the Lumiere Brothers and Leon Bouly. The Cinematograph, the Bioscope, the Biograph, the Vitascope and the Projectoscope were introduced in quick succession – each touted to be better than the former.

These earliest screenings were attractive only because of their novelty factor. In retrospect, the long wait between each vignette, "the incessant flickering, and the large and frequent blotches of white that traversed the screen when ...nearing what promised to be the most interesting part of the subject" detracted from the pleasure of the experience.[13] The developing technology was the cause of these discomforts in part, but the tropical weather was also a factor: "(f)licker and vibration visible on the screen were due to the effect of the moisture of the atmosphere causing the films to stick and run at times unevenly...".[14] Short live performances to keep the audience entertained served as fillers during technical glitches, a change in film or other delays. Eventually, as the technology improved, the films began to run more smoothly and were marked by fewer interruptions.

The Business of Early Cinema

The business, set-up and location of film-houses mirrored the trend set by circuses that were already doing their rounds at the time in Singapore and key cities of the Malay Peninsula, the Malay archipelago and beyond.[15] Business entrepreneurs who saw the commercial potential of this new technology brought in reels of film with a large repertoire of shows. In Singapore, early cinema managers would pitch makeshift tents in the style of a circus, either on Beach Road or at the foot of Fort Canning Hill. One even billed itself as the "Barnum of Cinematographs".[16]

Using tents gave flexibility to these set-ups as extra seats, for example, could easily be brought in from nearby hotels or patrons could stand in between chairs.[17] These tents were far from makeshift: Matsuo's Japanese Cinematograph along Beach Road was commended for its tent decorations as well as its ventilation and lighting.[18] Not to be outdone, the tent next to it, the London Chronograph, was described as "fitted with electric lights and fans; the seating accommodation is good, special attention having been paid to the comfort of anticipated patrons."[19]

Existing stage halls and music rooms also served as prime locations for screenings. These included the Adelphi Hall, which was part of the Adelphi Hotel at Coleman Street, and the Town Hall at Empress Place

(Facing page) Plan of a cinematograph tent located at Jalan Sungei at Serangoon Road in 1908. *Building Control Authority Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*
(Above) A man watching a scene using the Kinetoscope. *Via Wikimedia Commons.*
(Above right) *The Serpentine Dance*, a form of burlesque, was one of the first vignettes screened at the Aldephi Hall in 1897. © The Serpentine *Dance. Directed by Louis Lumiere, produced by Lumiere. France, 1897.*
(Right) Frenchmen August and Louis Lumiere were one of the first filmmakers in history. *Via pixgood.com.*
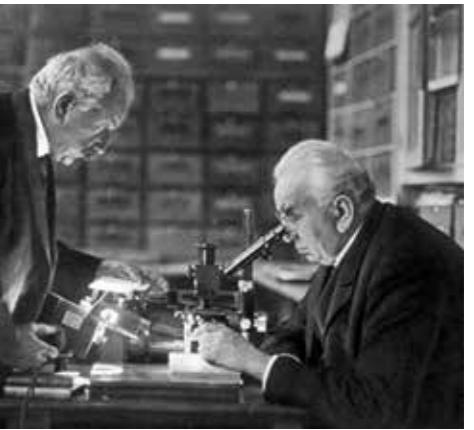
(which was later rebuilt as Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall). Some of the earliest movies were screened at these venues. In 1897, daily screenings at the Adelphi Hall included vignettes such as *The Charge of Lancers*, *The Serpentine Dance* and *Li Hung-Chang in Paris*, with admission costing 50 cents for back-row seats and $1 for front seats.[20]

Some hotels, in fact, modified their structures to allow for the screening of movies, such as the Raffles Hotel, which in June 1908 converted its Billiard Hall to a Music Hall to screen films by Edison Studios, a film production company founded by the inventor Thomas Edison.[21] These sophisticated locations charged higher entrance fees and invariably attracted the upper echelons of society. In 1908, the Raffles Hotel immediately raised its ticket price to $2 after the success of their first screening – *Ben Hur*.[22]

In its earliest years, the business of cinematography was tenuous and the management of these tents and halls frequently changed hands. However, as cinema's popularity – and financial returns – grew, the tents soon gave way to simple constructed halls and, subsequently, to more elaborately designed "picture palaces". French entrepreneur Paul Picard, with support from jewellers Levy Hermanos, is often credited for opening the first enclosed cinema in Singapore in 1904, the Paris Cinematograph, which occupied a section rented from the Malay Theatre on Victoria Street.[23] Other larger cinema halls soon sprouted, including the Alhambra (1907) and Marlborough (1909) along Beach Road and the Palladium (1914) on Orchard Road .[24]

The early entertainment empire builder before the advent of Shaw and Cathay was Tan Cheng Kee, the eldest son of pioneer business leader Tan Keong Saik. He not only invested in the key theatres – the Alhambra, the Marlborough and the Palladium Cinema – but also revamped their decor and worked out a sound business strategy.[25]

Tan engaged artist W.J. Watson to add colour and grandeur to the proscenium of the Alhambra. Painted in opal blue, amethyst, gold orange and crimson, it had "ten flags of the leading nations group round an architectural arch and pediment enclosing the screen. The wreathed bust of Shakespeare [was] in the centre over the word 'Alhambra', surrounded by roses."[26]

In 1916, the Alhambra was rebuilt and renamed the New Alhambra. Designed by Eurasian architect Johannes Bartholomew (Birch) Westerhout, the New Alhambra accommodated an audience of 1,500 with a variety of seats, including special box seats, each holding comfortable armchairs, and a specially designated box for members of the Malay royalty. Other lavish details included
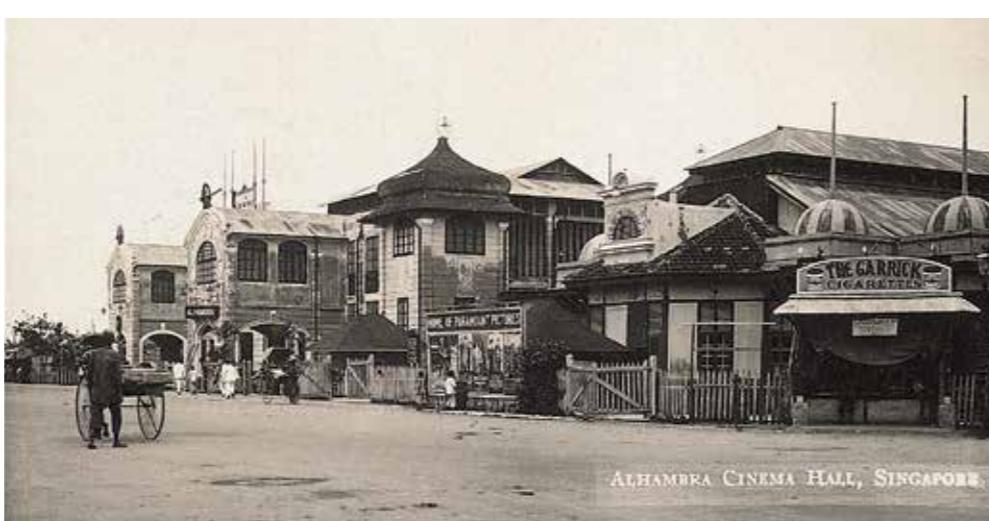
(Above) Adelphi Hotel on Coleman Street, as seen in a 1906 postcard. Adelphi Hall, where Singapore's earliest film screenings were held in 1897, was part of the hotel. *Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*
(Top) A 1930 postcard of the Alhambra cinema along Beach Road. Taken from the book *Singapore: 500 Early Postcards*, published by Editions Didier Millet (2007). *Courtesy of Prof Cheah Jin Seng.*

"costly curtains" that draped down the stage doors, a "beautifully tiled floor", electric lights, large mirrors and a private telephone booth.[27]

Tan paid $25,000 for the Palladium (also designed by J.B. Westerhout) a mere four years after it was built.[28] This was a steal considering it had cost $60,000 to construct. Tan continued to push the envelope with the development of local cinemas, fitting them in 1930 with equipment for sound so that the first "talkies" could be screened.[29]

Malaya in Early Films

A great variety of shows were screened in Singapore's early cinemas – from street processions to snippets of life in Malaya.

From as early as 1897, short films such as *The Jubilee Procession* in London which commemorated the British Queen's reign and the British Empire's rule, were frequently featured.[30] What is less known is that since the earliest screening of film in Singapore, aspects of Malaya and the region have been featured in these seedling productions. M. Talbot, one of the first to film the wonders of "Malay Native life", screened his production of boys bathing in a river in Batavia and elegant Javanese dancing girls at the Adelphi Hall in 1898.[31] This film was subsequently exhibited in Bangkok to rave reviews.[32]

By this time, local cinemas were regularly screening films showing snippets of life in the region, such as *Singapore*

(Left) *The Road to Singapore* (1931) is a romantic drama starring William Powell and Doris Kenyou. © The Road to Singapore. *Directed by Alfred E. Green, produced and distributed by Warner Bros. United States, 1931. Courtesy of Wong Han Min.*
(Below) *A Day at Singapore*, featured short snippets of life in Singapore. © A Day at Singapore. *Directed by George Méliès, 1913.*
(Bottom left) George Méliès (1861–1938) was a French illusionist and filmmaker. *Via Wikimedia Commons.*

Harbour, *Scenes in Batavia*, *Malay Dancing* and *FMS Railway*. Harold Mease Lomas was one such cameraman who took extensive "living pictures" of North Borneo in 1903, 1904 and 1908 while working for the Urban Bioscope Company.[33] These films of Borneo "must have been secured at great labour and expense, if not danger, and excellently portray conditions among the wilder Malay tribes of that great island".[34]

By 1907, film distribution had moved from the hands of itinerant businessmen importing American and European films. Singapore had become a distribution centre of films in the region, with French company Pathé Freres as a key anchor.[35] This transformed the ease with which films could be obtained, the scale in which they were shown and the variety of films that could be screened.

News documentaries became a regular feature in the cinemas when *The Animated Gazette*, produced by Pathé Freres, was broadcast weekly at the Alhambra in 1910.[36] Singapore's port and seascapes were often filmed, sometimes as standalone featurettes, like the 1910 Pathé film, *Singapore,* or as short vignettes, such as *A Day at Singapore*

by Georges Méliès, which showcased "a most interesting little trip...to see one of the largest seaports in the world".[37] Méliès was world renowned for his fantastical movies using special effects such as *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904). His film on Singapore was made during his travels through the South Pacific and Asia between 1912 and 1913. It is uncertain if these short films were ever screened in Singapore, though they were certainly shown in other countries.

While narrative films featuring Singapore came out of then-budding Hollywood soon after, they were often only Singaporean in name; these films were not shot on location in Singapore, and worse, rarely featured Asian actors. These include MGM's *Across to Singapore* (1928) starring

Joan Crawford and Ramon Novarro, *Sal of Singapore* (1928) produced by Howard Higgin, *The Crimson City* (1928, also known as *La Schiava di Singapore*) starring Myrna Loy and Anna May Wong, *The Road to Singapore* (1931) shot by Alfred E. Green, and between 1923 and 1933, *Out of Singapore* directed by Charles Hutchinson and *Malay Nights* (also known as *Shadows of Singapore*).[38]

The 1933 film *Samarang* (see text box overleaf), styled as a pseudo-documentary (only to allow some nudity), is likely the earliest Hollywood feature film to be shot in Singapore. However, it was the Singapore-made vernacular films *Xin Ke* (新客, *The Immigrant, 1927*) and *Leila Majnun* (1934) that made a bigger impact on the local film scene. These productions were produced by Asians, featured an Asian cast and carried authentic storylines. These films made set the scene for the flourishing of the Malayan film industry in the 1950s. ◆

THE FIRST MADE-IN-SINGAPORE FILMS

Samarang

Released in 1933 and shot off the coast of Katong in 1932, *Samarang* (also known as *Semarang*, *Out of the Sea* and *Shark Woman*) is probably Hollywood's first production to be filmed entirely in Singapore. *Samarang* recounts the romance between a pearl fisherman and a local chieftain's daughter with cannibals, sharks and a python thrown in for good measure. It was produced by United Artists and B.F. Zeidman, directed by Ward Wing and written by Lori Bara.[39]

Samarang is the first Hollywood film about Singapore where the lead actors were locals, with Capt. A.V. Cockle playing the role of Ahmang, the North Bornean Dayak hero, and Theresa Seth as Sai-Yu, the Chinese beauty. Although both actors lived in Singapore, they were not of Asian descent – Cockle, from Britain, was an Inspector of Police based here and Seth was the daughter of an Armenian businessman who had settled in Singapore.[40] The leads were obviously chosen for their telegenic looks: Cockle had the brawny physique of a swimmer and Seth was a beauty pageant contestant. Several locals, many of whom were experienced *bangsawan* actors, undertook bit parts while much of the *kampong* scenes featured its own local residents.[41]

Samarang was screened in the US in 1933 to rave reviews. The film's popularity might have been due to its novelty but also possibly because Sai-Yu is topless for most of the second half of the film. It was first screened at the Alhambra in September 1933 and later at the Marlborough in 1934, where it was hailed as Singapore's first talkie[42] – although reviewers noted that it was "virtually a silent film except for a synchronized music score and occasional choral singing. The action [was] explained by subtitles, and although there [were] melodramatic episodes, they [were] for the most part set forth with... little skill."[43]

Xin Ke (新客, The New Immigrant)

Produced by Liu Beijin, 新客 (*Xin Ke*; The New Immigrant, 1927) is believed to be the first Chinese feature film that was completely shot in Singapore and Malaya. Of Fujian origins, Liu (1902–1959) was born in Singapore but grew up in Muar, Johor. Although inspired by the booming Shanghainese movie industry, he felt slighted as an overseas Chinese when he visited China in December 1925.

When Liu returned home three months later, he was inspired to produce

Xin Ke, a melodrama about a newly arrived Chinese in Singapore, in part to convey the social struggles and issues facing the immigrant Chinese. Liu also hoped to revive an interest in Chinese culture among the Chinese community in Singapore, while depicting the life of an overseas Chinese to the Chinese in China.

Working from a rented house at 58 Meyer Road that served as a studio, staff dormitory and film processing room, Liu purchased French-made cinematographic equipment and auditioned more than 100 prospective actors for his film.

The scenes were shot at the Botanic Gardens in Singapore and the interiors of 58 Meyer Road, as well as across the causeway on rubber plantations and at the Sultan of Johor's palace. Production ended in February 1927 and in the following month, the film had its test screening at Victoria Theatre.

By 7pm on the day of the test screening, more than 100 people were already waiting in line for the free tickets that were given out at the entrance of Victoria Theatre and by the time the film started, the 500-seat theatre was full. The black-and-white silent film totalled nine reels and was accompanied by both Chinese and English subtitles.

Xin Ke is unique because many local films produced thereafter were in Malay. It wasn't until almost two decades later in July 1946 that a major production in Chinese made its appearance in Singapore with the release of *Blood and Tears of Overseas Chinese* (华侨血泪) by China Film Studio. Soon after its premier in Singapore, *Xin Ke* was released in Hong Kong as *Tang Shan Lai Ke* (唐山來客). *Xin Ke* was the only film that Liu released, but unfortunately the original reels are no longer extant.

Leila Majnun

Leila Majnun (1934) is the first Malay-language feature film produced in Singapore. The film is a tragedy in the vein of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with elements of the Arabian *One Thousand and One Nights*. The plot centres on two lovers, Leila and Majnun, whose love is forbidden due to social conventions. Majnun is driven to despair and madness, thus living up to his name Majnun, which means "madness" in Arabic.

In the 1930s, Rai Bahadur Seth Hurdutroy Motilal Chamria of Calcutta began distributing made-in-India films in Singapore. In 1932, his Urdu version of *Leila Majnun* met with such success in Bombay that he was inspired to produce a Singapore version. Bardar Singh Rajhans, who had already produced two films in India, moved from Calcutta to Singapore to direct the film, which cost $5,000 to produce. After the war, Rajhans continued to shape the local Malay film industry by directing several other significant films.

The role of Leila was played by popular local star Fatima binti Jasman, a singer with HMV Records, while Syed Ali bin Mansoor, a well-known *bangsawan* stage actor acted as Majnun.

The film's gala opening was held on March 1934 at the Marlborough. The dialogue was in classical Malay and the film was much praised although there were criticisms over the technical quality of the pictures. In 1962, B. N. Rao, by then an established director, remade this movie as *Laila Majnun*.

The full citations for Xin Ke *and* Leila Majnun *can be found on HistorySG (http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history)*

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THE GOLDEN AGE OF MALAY CINEMA

1947–1972
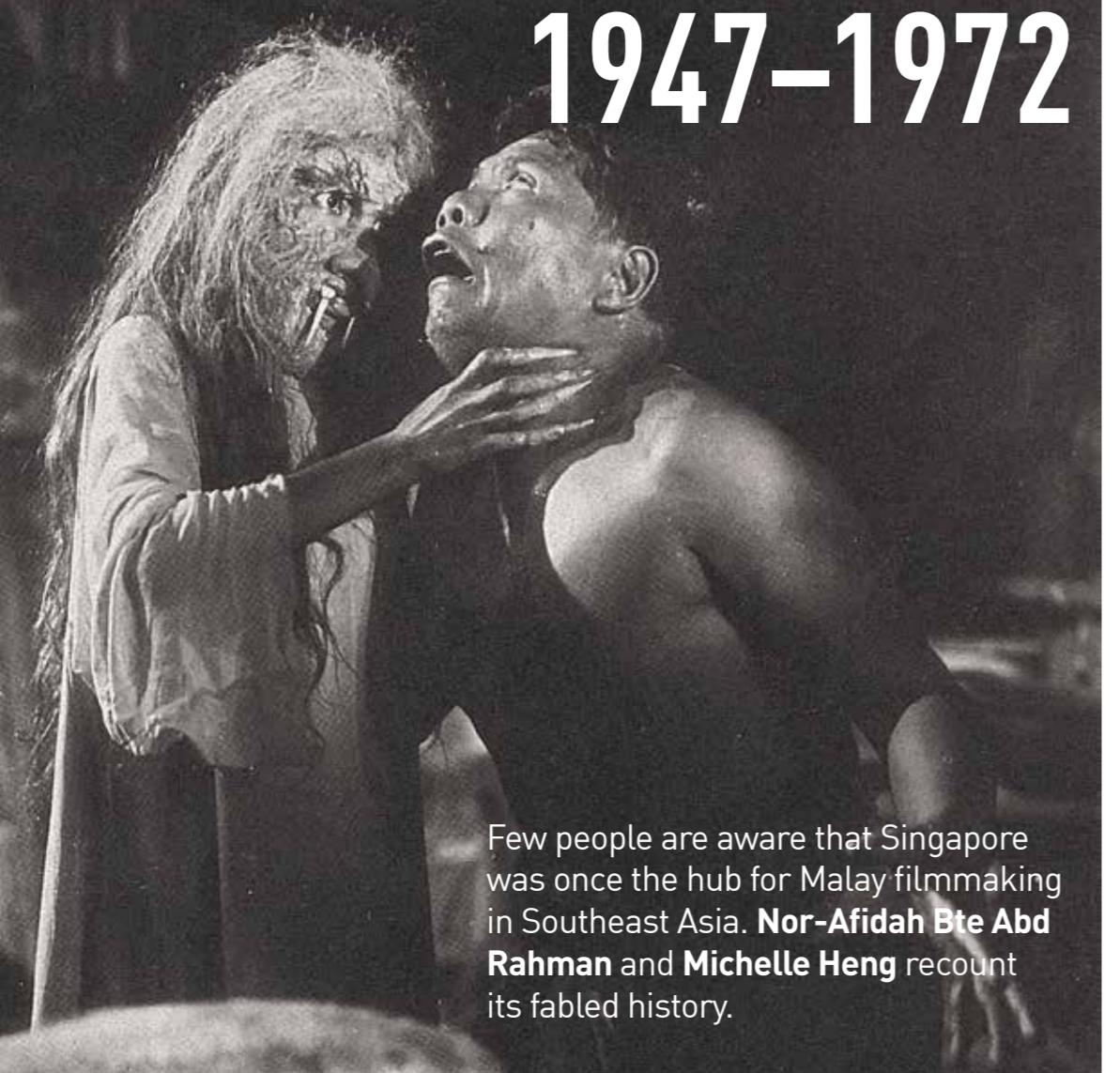
Few people are aware that Singapore was once the hub for Malay filmmaking in Southeast Asia. **Nor-Afidah Bte Abd Rahman** and **Michelle Heng** recount its fabled history.

Nor Afidah Bte Abd Rahman is a Senior Librarian with the National Library of Singapore and a regular contributor to *BiblioAsia*.

Michelle Heng is a Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. She compiled and edited *Singapore Word Maps: A Chapbook of Edwin Thumboo's New and Selected Place Poems* (2012), and more recently, *Selected Poems of Goh Poh Seng* (2014).

a Azizah, the alluring customer-turned-love-interest of trishaw-rider Amran (played by screen legend P. Ramlee) visits his run-down hut for the first time in *Penarek Becha* (1955). When Amran bemoans his humble station in life, she delivers a sagely line in return, "*Tuhan tidak akan memberi sahaja kalau manusia tidak berusaha* (God won't just help people unless they make an effort)."[1] The audience watches with bated breath as this beauty-with-brains helps her humble beau make a success of his life. Azizah (played by the sweetheart of Malay movies, Sa'adiah) vows to help him attend night school. This turns out to be just the kind of push an honest-but-poor trishaw rider needs to scale the rigid social ladder of the time and seek the blessings of her parents. For cinema audiences, the film's central theme – the rejection of inequality through the pursuit of education – was a timely reminder of the need for self-reliance:[2] Malaya was in the midst of agitating for independence from her British colonial administrators.

Penarek Becha (The Trishaw Puller) was a major box office hit when it was released in 1955 and was a watershed film[3] for both its actor-director, P. Ramlee – the multi-hyphenate Renaissance Man of the Malay silver screen – as well as the local film industry. The success of this film paved the way for other Malays to direct films that suited the community's sensibilities and ignited far-reaching changes in the screen image of the modern Malay and his struggle to come to terms with a rapidly changing world.[4]

Shaw Brothers vs Cathay-Keris

The winds of change, as far as post-World War II domestic film production was concerned, had already swept through Singapore with the 1947 release of the first post-war Malay film, *Seruan Merdeka (The Call For Freedom)*,[5] produced by S.M. Chisty of Malayan Arts Productions, and directed by the influential Calcutta-born auteur, B.S. Rajhans, who was also the director of the first Malay-language film in Singapore, *Laila Majnun* (1934).[6] Starring Salleh Ghani and Siti Tanjung Perak, *Seruan Merdeka* focused on how young Malay and Chinese Singaporeans came together to resist the Japanese occupiers. It was a rare screen outing as it was unusual to see both Malay and Chinese actors on the screen. Although the film was a commercial failure due to a lack of cinemas, and consequently, limited exposure, *Seruan Merdeka*[7] marked the start of what was to become the 25-year-long golden age of Malay cinema in Singapore.[8]

Shortly after World War II, Shaw Brothers reopened their film production studios at 8 Jalan Ampas, which had closed during the Japanese Occupation. In a shrewd business move, Shaw Brothers started Malay Film Productions (MFP) Ltd in order to tailor-make movies for the growing number of Malay film-buffs in Singapore and Malaya, which at the time was the most rapidly expanding regional market.[9] Adopting the lucrative, vertically-integrated models of Hollywood studios such as MGM and Paramount, Shaw enjoyed an almost unrivalled monopoly of the Malay film industry. Between 1947 and 1952 alone, the prolific MFP produced 37 feature films, the first of which was B.S. Rajhan's *Singapura Di Waktu Malam* (1947, *Singapore Night*).[10]

While the Shaws' pre-World War II Malay films featured *bangsawan* actors and were helmed by Chinese directors including Hou Yao and Wan Hoi Ling, MFP's stable of experienced Indian directors brought in from the subcontinent ensured a steady flow of Indian-influenced films with 'overstylised' acting as well as song and dance sequences.[11] Certain cultural barriers, however, proved difficult to overcome as the direct translation of movie plots, dialogues and style carried over from Indian films caused rifts between foreign and home-grown talents at MFP.[12]

At this point, Rajhans recognised the need to infuse his crew with fresh blood instead of relying solely on the local traditional *bangsawan* (Malay opera) performers who had crossed over into the world of moving pictures. Whilst on talent-scouting trips in the Malay Peninsular and Singapore, Rajhans spotted the young musician P. Ramlee and

(Facing page) Maria Menado as the *pontianak* in B.N. Rao's 1957 *Dendam Pontianak*. © Dendam Pontianak. *Directed by B. Narayan Rao, produced by Cathay-Keris Films. Singapore, 1957.*
(Top left) P. Ramlee was an actor-singer who starred in many of Shaw's MFP's films. © 120 Malay Movies, *Amir Muhammad, published by Matahari Books, 2010.*
(Top right) A 1948 flyer advertising *Singapura Di Waktu Malam (Singapore Night)*, one of MFP's earliest Malay films and starring Siput Sarawak and Bachtiar Effendi. © Singapura Di Waktu Malam. *Directed by B.S. Rajhans, produced by Malay Film Productions, 1947. Courtesy of Wong Han Min.*

quickly hired the charismatic singer-actor. Ramlee made his screen debut in the 1948 film *Chinta (Love)*, playing the supporting role of a swarthy villain opposite screen siren Siput Sarawak.[13]

Not to be eclipsed was rival Cathay Organisation's Cathay-Keris Films with its studios at Jalan Keris in the East Coast area. In 1953, Cathay's chairman Loke Wan Tho teamed up with Keris Film Productions' managing director Ho Ah Loke to form the Cathay-Keris Studio. Cathay-Keris was to pose a serious challenge to Shaw Brothers MFP's dominance in the Malay film industry.[14]

Ho was a maverick producer who cut his teeth in the industry in 1925; not only did he buy a cinema in Ipoh at the age of 25, he also rode his bicycle to small neighbouring towns to screen his reels of films.[15] After a former partnership with Rimau Film Productions had run its course, Ho formed his own company, Keris Film, in 1952. Not long after, Cathay's Loke collaborated with Ho in the production of *Buloh Perindu* (Magic Flute), believed to be the first Malay-language film shot in colour and released in 1953 under the Cathay-Keris Films banner.[16] Due to the paucity of expertise and limited supply of filmmaking talent, Ho was said to have recruited directors of Indian origin from MFP as these auteurs had the requisite years of experience from working with the Shaw Brothers. Among the talented directors were Dato L. Krishnan, B.N. Rao and K.M. Basker.[17]

A turning point in the Malay film industry occurred in 1957 when a dispute broke out between the film workers union, PERSAMA (Malayan Artists Union) and executives at Shaw Brothers following the dismissal of five Malay film actors and actresses employed by MFP and agitations for wage increases and better employee prospects.[18] A strike soon followed. When negotiations remained at an impasse, Cathay-Keris' Ho allegedly muscled in on the situation by sending rice supplies and encouraging notes to the strikers in order to lure actors, directors and technicians to his studios where better remuneration and equipment beckoned.[19]

Following the strikes, Cathay-Keris released one of the most notable cult films in the Malay movie industry, *Pontianak* (1957), starring the radiant *kebaya*-queen from Indonesia, Maria Menado. The ghoulish tale of a beauty-turned vampire who could only be killed with a nail driven into her skull was directed by B.N. Rao. The phenomenal success of *Pontianak* – which spawned the sequel *Dendam Pontianak (Pontianak's Revenge)* in the same year and consequently the horror film genre – heralded the arrival of Cathay-Keris as a formidable opponent in the industry.[20] Menado, too, rode the crest of her success in the *Pontianak* films to become

Actress-producer Maria Menado (of the *Pontianak* movie fame) in 1960. *K.F. Wong collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.*

Malaya's first film-star producer with her own company, Maria Menado Productions, rivalling P. Ramlee's status in the filmmaking sphere.[21]

A Steady Decline

Following the 1957 strike at Shaw Brothers, tensions among the Malay staff and resentment over labour disputes lingered at MFP. In a few years, most of Shaw Brothers' Malay-language film production had moved to Kuala Lumpur.[22] Its one profitable star, P. Ramlee was given the opportunity to make a film, *Seniwati (Female Artiste)*, in Hong Kong but this deal fell through amid fears that such a venture would lack cultural resonance among the Malays and deal a blow to the local film industry.[23] With diminished prospects, Ramlee moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1964, which coincided with a series of events leading to the decrease in Shaw Brothers' Malay film production efforts in Singapore. By 1967, MFP had closed.[24]

Meanwhile, Cathay-Keris faced stiff competition from television and the loss of the Indonesian cinema-goers' market due to the Konfrontasi (Confrontation) crisis between 1963 and 1966 that saw armed incursions and bomb attacks by Indonesian forces in Singapore. Cathay-Keris responded by retrenching 45 studio staff in 1965, and a further 17 staff in 1966.[25] By 1972, Cathay-Keris had produced its last film, *Satu Titik Di-Garisan (A Drop at the Line)*, marking the end of Malay film production in Singapore.

After Shaw and Cathay shut down their studios in Singapore and moved their operations to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore lost

its status as the hub of the Malay film industry. The emergence of television as an alternative medium was one of the key factors that led to the demise of the homegrown tinsel towns along Jalan Ampas and Tampines.[26] While marquee names like P. Ramlee tried to gain a foothold in the Malaysian film industry, film talent in Singapore decided to focus their efforts on the small screen. New made-for-TV Malay movies started trickling into the vacuum as demand for entertainment was picked up by Radio and Television Singapore (RTS), which released popular series such as *Awang Temberang* [27] and *Sandiwara*.[28] The void left by the end of the golden age of Malay cinema was also filled by Indonesian Malay-language films with stars such as Brorey Marantika and Dicky Zulkarnain.[29]

Meanwhile, in a quirky departure from the past, independent producers made a string of English-language martial-arts-themed films: *Ring of Fury* (1973), *Bionic Boy* (1977), *They...Call Her Cleopatra Wong* (1978) and *Dynamite Johnson* (1978).[30] The latter trilogy, directed by Filipino auteur, Bobby A. Suarez[31] drew inspiration from the kungfu mania following Bruce Lee's phenomenal success and the blaxploitation genre that had become hugely popular in the US.[32] In particular, *Cleopatra Wong*, starring the 19-year-old Singaporean actress Doris Young (a.k.a Marrie Lee) quickly reached cult status and eventually inspired a young Quentin Tarantino, who later referenced the spirited, fly-kicking Interpol agent heroine who could hold her own amongst the most violent thugs and villains in his *Kill Bill* movies.[33]

In all, more than 250 Malay-language films were produced in Singapore over the 25-year reign of the golden age of local film, spawning a line-up of celebrity Malay stars in the process. These films have remained in the hearts of fervent fans who occasionally get to watch re-runs on television specials and during film festival screenings. The golden age of Malay cinema was symbolic for a generation of film audiences who had witnessed the transition from an oral storytelling tradition to a dynamic art form on the silver screen. While the study of Malay-language films remains somewhat overshadowed by other Asian cinematic arts, it is heartening to see the revived interest in these films, which are celebrated regularly at film festivals, tribute exhibitions to film-making talent of that era and, more recently, a permanent gallery at the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Glam.[34] ◆

The authors have jointly curated a book display "The Golden Age of Malay Cinema", at the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, Level 8, National Library Building. The display ends on 30 May 2015.

It's been decades but I do remember some of the people my father [director Jamil Sulong] used to work with in Jalan Ampas. The one person I remember clearly was A. V. Bapat the art director for most of MFP's movie[s]. If you manage to get a glimpse of the old Malay film posters – more than likely that it was his handiwork (like the Raja Bersiong poster...) I like the way he painted his posters...Uncle Bapat has long since passed on, ... sad that sometimes his contributions to the Malay film industry is overlooked. As far as I know, he did sets, costumes and all art direction when he was at Jalan Ampas.[46]

Shaw's Malay Film Production (MFP) Ltd and Cathay-Keris Films sustained movie-goers' interest in new releases through film tabloids and movie billboard posters. Movie posters used to be the only way people knew about what was playing at the cinemas[47] if they did not buy magazines and newspapers. In the absence of digital technology, poster painters had to draw and colour movie posters from scratch.

The late director Jamil Sulong, who joined the Shaw family in November 1951,[48] recalled that Shaw added new studios to accommodate the increasing workload with the success of MFP. One of the rooms of Studio No 9 at Jalan Ampas (in the Balestier area) was where the poster artists worked.[49]

Shaw's first art director was *bangsawan* (Malay opera) backdrop painter, Mohamamad Haniff (Pak Haniff).[50] When Pak Haniff died, other local painters replaced him, such as Mustafa Yassin who remained as art director until Shaw's last days in Singapore in 1967.[51] China-born Lim Ying Chang was employed as an artist apprentice by Shaw after the Japanese Occupation. He stayed with Shaw for 10 years and eventually became chief artist.[52] Eventually, Shaw brought in Indian expertise, with names such J. S. Anthony and A. V. Bapat appearing as art director in the credit roll at the start of the MFP films.[53] Bapat was MFP's art director from 1957 until the Shaw Studio closed in 1967 and is remembered for his close collaboration with director P. Ramlee. One of Bapat's last artworks was for *Raja Bersiong*, a film written by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman.[54]

The poster painters normally copied from pictures they were given. Although the work did not stretch their imaginations it was more important that they drew the faces of the stars as accurately as possible. More challenging was enduring the long hours of squatting over the canvasses as they painted. A team of two or three painters would work on a single billboard poster, while a huge one would take four to five days to complete.[55]

According to Chew Poi Yong, Cathay's painter in the early 1950s, two key ingredients for a good poster were proportion and colour: "...the first [was] to get the exaggerated dimensions right and the second to produce work that can be seen from afar". To get the right proportion, painters would first mark out squares on the canvas with white chalk. Once the sketch was made, they would go over the outline with a blue marker. White paint was then painted all over as background and through it the blue outline would appear as smudges. The "fun" would then begin as the painters added the other colours.[56]

Hand-painted film posters went through a boom from the 1950s until the 1970s with as many as 100 posters commissioned per film. In the past, as many as 10 painters would be mobilised to complete a big billboard requiring 100 pieces of plywood for mounting. As experienced painters retired and new blood could not be attracted to join the profession, dwindling manpower meant that only one painter was assigned to a poster.[57] By 1980, Shaw had closed down its art studio that produced its posters[58] and by the end of the 1980s, hand-painted posters had given way to their digital rivals.

Hand-painted film posters were the rage from the 1950s to 70s but slowed down by the 80s. Here, Neo Choon Teck, one of Singapore's last surviving billboard artists, reprises his work for the Singapore Short Film Awards in 2011. *Courtesy of SINdie (www.sindie.sg).*

TAYANGAN AKAN DATANG: POSTER LUKISAN TANGAN

Beberapa dekad telah berlalu tapi saya masih ingat dengan sekumpulan teman ayah yang dahulu bekerja di Jalan Ampas. Seorang yang masih segar di ingatan saya ialah A V Bapat, Pengarah Seni untuk kebanyakkan filem MFP [Malay Film Productions]. Kalau anda dapat melihat poster filem Melayu lama (seperti poster Raja Bersiong...), kemungkinan besar ia adalah hasil karya beliau. Saya minat dengan cara beliau melukis poster... Pakcik Bapat telah lama pergi dan ia menyedihkan kadang kala sumbangan beliau kepada industri filem Melayu dilupakan. Setahu saya, beliau bertugas sebagai pereka set, pakaian dan semua kerja artistik semasa di Jalan Ampas.

Shaw dan Cathay cuba memenuhi citarasa peminat filem Melayu terhadap perkembangan filem dengan mengeluarkan tabloid dan poster filem. Bagi yang tidak melanggan sebarang makalah, poster-poster filem yang dipamerkan di pawagam setempat adalah cara terunggul untuk mengetahui tayangan terkini dan yang dapat ditonton dalam jangkamasa terdekat. Di sebalik poster gah yang terpampang, mungkin ramai tidak dapat meneka yang banyak poster filem dihasilkan oleh pelukis-pelukis yang hanya bersinglet dan seluar pendek, dengan tangan comot berlumuran cat.

Waktu saya masih kecil, saya sering bermain di studio-studio [Jalan Ampas] ketika ibu-bapa saya sedang sibuk berkerja... Ada tiga buah studio di Jalan Ampas...Studio yang ketiga, di mana ayah saya bertugas (dan juga artis-artis yang melukis canvas untuk billboard filem) telah dirobohkan dan diganti dengan bangunan pejabat...

Studio No 9 Jalan Ampas adalah bangunan yang banyak melahirkan poster lukisan tangan Malay Film Production (MFP). Sambutan hangat terhadap filem MFP dan kegiatan perfileman yang meningkat mendorong, Shaw untuk menaikkan

bangunan-bangunan studio yang baru. Di sebuah bilik di Studio No 9 yang baru inilah tempat pelukis-pelukis poster berkarya. Mereka bekerja di bawah arahan seorang Pengarah Seni (nama glamour untuk pelukis set). Awalnya di Shaw, jawatan ini disandang oleh Mohamamad Haniff (Pak Haniff), seorang pelukis pentas bangsawan. Ia merupakan pencapaian yang membanggakan kerana Shaw pada era ini lebih banyak mengutamakan karyawan-karyawan import dari India, China dan Hong Kong untuk memenuhi jawatan pengarah dan juruteknik filem. Setelah pemergian Pak Haniff, jawatannya di ambil-alih oleh pelukis tempatan Mustafa Yassin yang terus berperan sebagai Art Director sehingga hari-hari akhir Shaw di Singapura. Pelukis kelahiran China, Lim Yin Chang, juga diambil oleh Shaw untuk berkhidmat sebagai pelukis perantis selepas perang Jepun. Beliau menimba pengelaman selama sepuluh tahun dan berjaya menjadi *Chief Artist* (Ketua Seni) sebelum meninggalkan studio Shaw. Namun Shaw turut menggajikan pelukis dari India untuk pimpinan artistiknya dan nama-nama seperti J S Anthony dan A V Bapat dapat terlihat sebagai Pengarah Seni di dalam credit roll bagi filem-filem MFP. Bapat menjadi sebagai Pengarah Seni MFP dari 1957 sehingga studio itu tutup pada 1967 dan banyak menyimpan kenangan manis ketika dia bergabung dengan pengarah legenda P Ramlee. Salah satu hasil terakhirnya adalah untuk filem *Raja Bersiong*, karangan mantan Perdana Menteri pertama Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Sebagai pelukis poster, mereka banyak meniru gambar yang tersedia ada. Hal ini tidak memeras kreativiti pelukis, namun melukis wajah-wajah pelakon

dengan tepat tetap diutamakan. Yang lebih mencabar ialah mereka terpaksa menahan lenguh dan letih akibat bercangkung berjam-jam untuk menyiapkan poster, sehingga mencetuskan gurauan yang pelukis berperut gendut tidak akan sanggup melakukan perkerjaaan ini. Lazimya dua atau tiga orang diberi sebuah poster untuk disiapkan dan poster ukuran besar memakan masa empat atau lima hari untuk siap.

Dua ciri utama untuk menjayakan poster ialah keseimbangan dan warna. Menurut Chew Poi Yong, seorang pelukis Cathay sejak tahun 50an, ciri pertama

penting untuk mencapai penglebaran ukuran yang baik dan ciri kedua penting untuk membolehkan poster dilihat dari jauh. Untuk memudahkan pelukis dalam penglebaran yang seimbang, mereka akan membuat tanda empat persegi dengan kapur putih. Selepas melakar gambar dengan marker biru, mereka mencurahkan cat putih ke atasnya untuk warna latar dan corengan dari lakaran gamabr tadi akan timbul. Maka bermulalah kegiatan mencorak gambar itu dengan warna-warna yang lain.

Permintaan untuk poster begitu rancak dari 50an ke 70an, hingga 100

keping boleh ditempah untuk setiap filem. Namun, pelukis-pelukis yang telah lama berkecimpung mula bersara sementara anak-muda tidak berminat untuk menceburi kraf ini. Kalau dahulu, seramai 10 pelukis dapat digembeling untuk menyiapkan sebuah billboard gah yang memerlukan 100 keping plywood sebagai *backing*. Dengan masa, tenaga yang sudah berkurangan menjadikan sebuah poster itu terpaksa disiapkan oleh seorang pelukis sahaja. Setelah berakhirnya tahun '80an, poster lukisan tangan mula akur dengan kehebatan poster digital. Bermula 1980, Shaw telah menutup studio yang

membuat poster filemnya. Pada 2005, hanya seorang pelukis poster, Neo Choon Teck, yang tinggal.

(**Top left**) Actress Normadiah on the cover of the now defunct Malay-language entertainment monthly magazine, *Asmara*. MFP studio at Jalan Ampas stands in the background.
© Asmara, *Issue 23. Published by S.O.A. Alsagoff for Geliga Publication Bureau (Singapore), 1956.*
(**Above**) *Raja Bersiong* is a 1968 historical film written by former Malaysian prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. © Raja Bersiong. *Directed by Jamil Sulong, produced by Malay Film Productions, 1968.*

NOT LOST IN TRANSLATION

Now, to increase my income, a friend of mine told me that, "Now, you can do some part-time work or subtitling for the film… In the pictures, we had to subtitle in English. He said, "You go to the studio, you write down the whole script yourself, then you write in English, you type it out, number it and then give it to the staff at the studio and they will do the work for you … But the amount of work was so much … after I'd finished my work in the evening at 5 o'clock, I go to the studio and work there until 12 o'clock…"
(Bana Nazeem. 1981, November 22. _Pioneers of Singapore_ [oral interview], reel 3, p. 3. Retrieved from the National Archives of Singapore)

After World War II, Shaw and Cathay realised that including subtitles in foreign-language films was a surefire way to attract local audiences to cinemas and ensure extended movie runs. Malay fans, enamoured of Bollywood films, soon formed snaking queues at Taj and Garrick cinemas in Geylang in the 1950s and 60s,[35] thanks to the Malay subtitles in Hindi films.[36] In fact, a decade before Hindustani megastar Dev Anand kept Malays gripped to their seats with his enigmatic fighting scenes, Chinese-educated masses in Singapore who did not understand English had already been drawn to American and British films because the screenings had included Chinese subtitles.[37]

Due to increasing demand, a pool of specialists and operators was employed to translate the foreign plots and lines.[38] In 1948, it was reported that there were only a handful of such specialists in Singapore and their job was described as "one of the hardest and most exciting tasks in the cinema business".[39] For the 1948 blockbuster _Hamlet_, Cathay employed a Hong Kong graduate, Lau Shing-yuen, to translate and prepare slides for its Chinese film subtitles[40] that were projected onto a small screen beneath the main screen. Getting the Chinese characters printed on the glass slides was a two-step process; first, painting the Chinese words in ink over the little glass followed by scratching the Chinese characters onto the glass surface with a metal stylus.

In 1953, a new form of subtitling was introduced. The previous method outlining the plot was not an accurate way of capturing the dialogue of the film.[41] To improve this, subtitles were superimposed on the film itself, enabling nearly 1,000 subtitles to be dubbed for each film. The new method premiered first in Hong Kong before becoming a hit in Singapore.[42]

Malay films of the 1950s and 60s, particularly P. Ramlee films, appealed to Malaya's cosmopolitan society because the universal themes they portrayed cut across language and cultural barriers.[43] In order to cater to non-Malay-speaking audiences, English subtitles were provided in Malay movies.[44] The then sole translator, writer Zulkifli Haji Muhammad joined Shaw Brothers' Jalan Ampas studio in 1960, eventually becoming assistant director, directing Malay films for Shaw.[45]

A Chinese flyer promoting _Anak Pontianak_ (1958). _Directed by Roman Estella, produced by Malay Film Productions Ltd. Singapore/ Hong Kong, 1958._

TERJEMAHAN BERKESAN: SARIKATA DALAM FILEM MELAYU

Selepas perang, Shaw dan Cathay melihat kesan positif dari penggunaan sarikata (sub-titles) yang telah merancakkan lagi sambutan terhadap tayangan filem-filem bahasa asing mereka. Peminat filem dari masyarakat Melayu yang berduyun-duyun ke Taj dan Garrick di Geylang dalam 50an dan 60an terkena demam Bollywood kerana dapat memahami filem hindi menerusi sarikata yang disediakan dalam Bahasa Melayu. Bahkan sedekad sebelum Dev Anand memukau penonton Melayu dengan aksi pertarungannya yang hebat, penonton-penonton Cina di Singapura yang tidak fasih dalam bahasa Inggeris telahpun tertarik untuk menonton filem-filem dari Amerika dan Britain kerana tersedianya sarikata dalam bahasa Cina. Sekumpulan pakar dan operator penterjemah telah digajikan untuk menyiapkan sarikata filem. Pada 1948, dilaporkan hanya segelintir sahaja menjadi tenaga pakar ini dan mereka dikatakan memikul tugas yang paling sukar dan teruja dalam industri perfileman. Untuk filem blockbuster _Hamlet_ yang ditayangkan dalam 1948, Cathay telah melantik seorang siswazah dari Hong Kong, Lau Shing-yuen, untuk menterjemah dan menyiapkan slides dalam bahasa Cina, yang kemudian dipancarkan ke skrin kecil di bawah tayangan gambar. Menyalin huruf Cina ke slides tersebut harus melalui dua tahap: melukis huruf degan Chinese ink dan memahat huruf Cina itu di atas slide kaca dengan stylus logam. Dalam 1953, cara ini telah diperbaharui kerana ianya hanya memuatkan plot filem secara ringkas dan kurang memaparkan jalan cerita dan dialog filem dengan sempurna. Untuk meningkatkan mutu terjemahan, sarikata sekarang dicetak langsung ke dalam filem dan ia dapat menghasilkan hampir 1000 sarikata bagi setiap filem. Cara baru ini dilancarkan di Hong Kong sebelum diperkenalkan di Singapura.

Filem-filem Melayu Shaw dan Cathay terutama karya P Ramlee disambut baik oleh masyarakat majmuk di Malaya kerana tema universalnya yang tidak kenal bahasa atau budaya. Filem klasik Melayu dapat dinikmati oleh peminat filem dari bangsa lain kerana disediakan sarikata dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Salah satu penterjemahnya ialah penulis Zulkifli Haji Muhammad yang mula menjalankan kerja-kerja sarikata di studio Jalan Ampas pada 1960 sebelum dilantik sebagai Penolong Pengarah. Mrs Wee, seorang lagi mantan pekerja Jalan Ampas dan teman kepada bintang legenda P Ramlee, banyak memeras tenaga untuk menyediakan sarikata untuk filem Melayu Shaw. Empat puluh tahun setelah studio Shaw ditutup pada 1967, beliau mengunjungi Jalan Ampas dan bangunan-bangunan renta di kawasan itu mengingatkan beliau kembali kepada hari-hari yang banyak beliau habiskan di salah satu Studio Shaw untuk menyunting dan mencetak sarikata ke dalam filem.

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SPIES, VIRGINS, PIMPS AND HITMEN

Singapore Through the Western Lens

Western filmmakers have always had a fascination for Singapore. **Ben Slater** tells you why.

Ben Slater is the author of *Kinda Hot: The Making of Saint Jack in Singapore* (Marshall Cavendish: 2006), a contributing writer to *World Film Locations: Singapore* (Intellect: 2014) and the editor of *25: Histories & Memories of the Singapore International Film Festival* (SGIFF: 2014). He is also the co-screenwriter of the feature film *Camera* (2014) and a lecturer at the School of Art, Media and Design at the Nanyang Technology University (NTU). His 10-film season of foreign films made in Singapore, "Beyond Saint Jack", is currently underway at the NUS Museum. See http://malayablackandwhite. wordpress.com for details.

W

While Singapore's own film industry has thrived and collapsed and then risen again, the history of foreign film production, particularly that of filmmakers from Europe and America making movies in and about the island is a long and fascinating one. This history is a reflection of the way Singapore has transformed over the last 50 years as well as changing perceptions of Singapore in the West.

The First Films

In the early 1930s, Frank Buck – the self-promoting Texan showman and exotic animal "collector" – pitched up in Singapore with a small film crew to shoot a version of his bestselling memoir *Bring 'Em Back Alive* (1932), re-enacting scenes of tigers and elephants being captured in their natural habitat. It was a huge success and spawned several sequels. Singapore, as depicted by Buck, contrasted the untamed wilderness of the jungle with the colonial sophistication of the Raffles Hotel. The result was a compelling myth of tropical Asia that was eagerly consumed by American film audiences.

At around the same time, Ward Wing, a bit-part American actor turned director, arrived in Singapore to make *Samarang* (variously known as *Semarang*, *Out of the Sea* and *Shark Woman*). Touted as a "jungle adventure" for American audiences and shot on a shoestring budget, it starred two

Caucasian expatriates (an English policeman and an Armenian beauty queen) and was scandalous for its prurient depiction of harmless tribesfolk as semi-naked cannibals. Whereas Buck's films were quasi-documentaries, Wing was the first Western filmmaker to shoot a narrative film in Singapore – albeit one that he took much artistic licence with. Inevitably, Wing's impulse was to exoticise and misrepresent Singapore. Still, 80 years later, we can view *Samarang* as a sublime documentary – the faces and behaviour of the extras, as well as the now forgotten landscapes indelibly captured on celluloid before they disappeared (see also page 10).

In travelling to Asia as filmmakers, Wing and Buck were pioneers. During this period, and well into the post-war era, "tropical Singapore", as Hollywood depicted it, was conjured up with stock footage and studio recreations of dark alleys, sleazy bars and jungle roads. (Many of these early Hollywood films purportedly set in Singapore never came within sniffing distance of the island.)

This fabricated Singapore was the perfect setting for Hollywood melodramas and thrillers concerning desperate souls set adrift in inhospitable foreign climes. The lovers in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rich And Strange* (1931), for instance, wind up in Singapore briefly, as do the heroes and *femme fatales* of *Night Cargo* (1936), *The Letter* (1930), adapted from a famous story by Somerset Maugham, *The Blonde from Singapore* (1941) and *Singapore* (1947), a loose remake of *Casablanca* that features Ava Gardner speaking Malay! This cycle of "Singapore *noir*" films reached its apotheosis with Robert Aldrich's explosive and bleak *World For Ransom* (1954), made using leftover sets (and actors) from the low-budget TV adventure series entitled *China Smith*, also set in our ersatz Lion City.
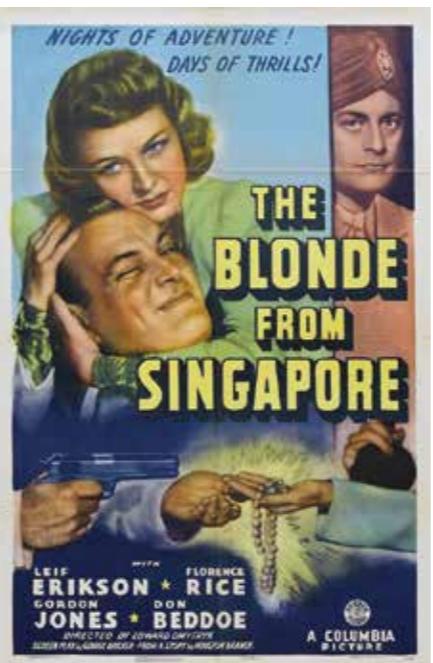
The Spying Sixties

From the 1960s, as Singapore gained independence and modernised rapidly, foreign film crews became commonplace, their arrival coinciding with the decline of the local film industry. Low-budget filmmaking was flourishing in the US and Europe, successful genres were quickly copied and exploited, and the "production value" provided by shooting in exotic foreign places more than made up for the price of long-distance air tickets (which were quite affordable at the time) and the effort of hauling over equipment and people.

A number of European B-movies were shot partially in Singapore in the 1960s, mostly "super-spy" films – knock-offs of the

James Bond genre. After all, international travel was as essential to the genre as gadgets, beautiful women and submachine guns. While Bangkok, Hong Kong and Tokyo were visited by 007 himself, a motley crew of European filmmakers descended at then Paya Lebar Airport to shoot their versions of the Bond film.

The hero of *So Darling So Deadly* (1966) is Agent Joe Walker (also known as the Kommissar X), an American spy-cum-detective film based on a series of German pulp fiction in this mostly Italian production starring American B-lister Tony Kendall and body-builder-turned-actor Brad Harris as his sidekick. The plot is ludicrous guff about atomic secrets (echoed in all of these spy films), but it is beautifully filmed and almost

entirely shot on location in Singapore and Johor (including a delightful chase through kitschy Haw Par Villa in Pasir Panjang).

This was followed by another Italian spy-flick, *Goldsnake: Anonima Killers* (1967), drastically less stylish and amusing than *So Darling So Deadly*, although it affords rare glimpses of a 1960s Orchard Road, among other locations in Singapore. Arguably the best of these films is *Five Ashore in Singapore* (1967), a French guys-on-a-secret-mission picture starring Sean Flynn and Dennis Berry, the offspring of Hollywood greats Errol Flynn and John Berry, respectively. The street scenes capture Singapore in the midst of celebrating its first National Day (the film was shot around August 1966), and in photographing the texture of street life, the camera crew seem to be far more curious about filming the scenery of Singapore than the violent gang of "heroes" who stomp, kick and shoot their way around the island with brutal indifference to their surroundings. But the worst was yet to come.

In late 1969, a Hong Kong-based American photographer and newsreel cameraman, Marvin Farkas, raised just enough money to make a spy thriller in Singapore. The premise for the film came from two Singapore-based war correspondents, Keith Lorenz and Ian Ward, who had aspirations to write a movie that captured an explosive moment in Southeast Asia (Vietnam and Indonesia were blowing up – literally; President Suharto had just come into power in Indonesia, and Vietnam was in the thick of a bloody war between the north and south). After some false starts, the inexperienced Farkas hired New Yorker Joel Reed to rewrite and helm his picture. Due to desperation, a fast-depleting budget and sheer expediency, the film, entitled *Wit's End,* became a laughable excuse for brawls, car chases, terrible acting, gratuitous nudity and overblown homophobia. After more or less disappearing upon completion, it was (nonsensically) retitled *G.I. Executioner* in the 1980s. Incredibly, the film had the support of Singapore's Cathay-Keris Films and the Ministry of Culture, an indicator of how keen Singapore was to court foreign films.

The "Hollywood" Years

In fact, Hollywood *did* come calling in the late 1960s, initially via two British (but American studio-backed) productions, both adapted from literary sources. *Pretty Polly* (1967) was a big-budget romantic drama adapted from an acidic Noel Coward short story set in Singapore. Its shoot around town caused enormous excitement due to the presence of teen megastar Hayley Mills in the title role, alongside Bollywood king Sashi Kapoor as a Singapore tour guide Amaz, who doubles up as a gigolo. Although the film was a huge flop and has never been released in Singapore, it remains a fascinating depiction of the island as a hedonistic playground for swinging grown-ups (there is a long sequence filmed in the Bugis Street of yesteryear), and where Mills experiences sexual and romantic liberation.

The other Hollywood production from this time also tells the tale of a young visitor gaining a worldly education from a "native". *The Virgin Soldiers* (1969) is a faithful adaptation of Leslie Thomas' poignant autobiographical novel about his experiences as a bored recruit stationed in Singapore during the post-war Malayan Emergency (the armed conflict between the British

and local Communists guerrillas between 1948 and 1960). Young soldier Brigg (Hywel Bennett) loses his virginity to and falls for Chinatown girl "Juicy" Lucy (Tsai Chin), but the tedium of Singapore eventually erupts into violence, bringing their dalliance to an end. Both *Pretty Polly* and *The Virgin Soldiers* deal with the aftermath of the colonial era, the sun setting on the British Empire, and the growing tension between locals and their former colonial masters-turned-interlopers.

The local press gave wide coverage to these films and reported how Singapore benefited from the presence of these productions. Tom Hodge, general manager of Cathay-Keris (which provided production support to these films), was frequently quoted as being optimistic about Singapore's future as an Asian outpost for Hollywood. But this bubble was about to burst.

The next American film due to be shot in Singapore was meant to be the biggest yet. Oscar-winning film director Frederick Zinnemann had planned to adapt André Malraux's novel *Man's Fate* with Singapore standing in for Shanghai. Millions of dollars were spent on pre-production, locations were selected, local actors cast and crew hired, but at the last minute, in 1969, MGM, the studio that

Saint Jack was a controversial movie filmed on location in Singapore and banned for nearly 30 years. © Saint Jack. *Directed by Peter Bogdanovich, produced by Hugh M. Hefner and Edward L. Rissien, distributed by New World Pictures. United States, 1978.*

SAINT JACK: A NEW TAKE ON SINGAPORE

Adapted from the novel by Paul Theroux (who taught English Literature at the University of Singapore from 1968 to 1971), *Saint Jack* featured another white man cutting loose in the Lion City. But Jack Flowers, a ships chandler and pimp, portrayed by Ben Gazzara in the film, represented a more nuanced protagonist. Flowers is an "old hand" who slips with ease between the expatriate circle and the local world, with Singaporeans who become his friends, colleagues and lovers (and who have substantial roles in the film – another first). The film – shot entirely in Singapore between May and June 1978 – was banned because of its "negative portrayal" of the island, but in fact has a deeper interest and understanding of Singapore than any previous foreign production. Flowers may bitterly complain about Singapore in the film, and memorably tells a drunken, ironic version of the legend of how Sang Nila Utama named the island Singapore, but he is also clearly very fond of his adopted home. Bogdanovich counts *Saint Jack* as one of his favourites among the many great films he made, and over the years

has repeatedly regretted that the film is not better known. His experience in Singapore was "life-changing", and his most recent film, *She's Funny That Way* (2015), about a man who falls in love with a prostitute, is a clear reworking of ideas he developed for *Saint Jack*.

Ben Gazzara (Jack Flowers) getting a tattoo while co-star Denholm Eliot looks on in the film *Saint Jack*. © Saint Jack. *Directed by Peter Bogdanovich, produced by Hugh M. Hefner and Edward L. Rissien, distributed by New World Pictures. United States, 1978.*

commissioned the film, pulled the plug on the film. It was a financial disaster and an embarrassment for MGM and Singapore, and although in no way the latter's fault (the film was just too expensive for the studio), it appeared to cool Hollywood's interest in the Lion City and vice versa. A number of other studio productions slated to be filmed in Singapore, including an adaptation of James Clavell's *Tai Pan,* starring Patrick McGoohan, were similarly cancelled.

In 1978 it looked as if things would change. Singapore was all abuzz over the arrival of the stars and production crew of *Hawaii 5-0*, one of the biggest TV shows in the world, to shoot two episodes in town. Simultaneously, journalists reported that Hollywood *wunderkind* director Peter Bogdanovich was also in town scouting locations for a film called *Jack of Hearts*. In actual fact Bogdanovich was already in the process of surreptitiously shooting what would turn out to be the infamous *Saint Jack*. The subsequent story of how, according to the press, Bogdanovich had "cheated" Singapore in order to make his less-than-flattering portrayal of the republic, overshadowed the merits of the film (see text box). *Saint Jack* (1978) would be banned in Singapore

for nearly 30 years, and almost certainly made the powers-that-be cautious about granting permission to foreign films crews.

Transformative Times

During the 1980s, Singapore's popularity as a film location declined. The old cinematic city, with steamy jungles, crumbling mansions, derelict shophouses and bustling streetlife, was now dominated by brand new skyscrapers, high-rise housing blocks and cleaned-up streets. In achieving Western-style modernity, Singapore had lost some of the charms and exotica that originally drew Western film companies to its shores.

There were sporadic TV productions, mainly from Australia (World War II mini-series *Tenko* and *Tanamera – Lion of Singapore* were partially shot on location) as well as the American TV movie *Passion Flower* (1986) starring Bruce Boxleitner and Barbara Hershey. *Passion Flower* is a glossy contrast between sensual, incense-infused Chinatown and the cold, high-tech towers of Shenton Way and sets the scene for a world of sexual and financial deceit played out between two expatriates in Singapore. Amusingly, Raffles Hotel is recast as the lavish office of a cruel billionaire and a few "locals" with speaking parts are depicted as mere pawns in the high-stakes game.

For the next few years, there would be no major foreign film productions set in Singapore until James Dearden's *Rogue Trader* (1999). Ewan McGregor starred as Nick Leeson, the real-life broker who brought about the collapse of Barings bank on the Singapore Stock Exchange in

The soon-to-be-released *Hitman: Agent 47* was partly filmed on location in Singapore. © Hitman: Agent 47. *Directed by Alek Sander Bach, produced by Adrian Askarieh, Alex Young and Charles Gordon, distributed by 20th Century Fox. United States and Germany, 2015.*

the mid-1990s. Despite being thoroughly dull, and only partly shot on location (the exchange floor was recreated in a London studio), *Rogue Trader* is significant in that it contains no trace of the usual Orientalist clichés that Western filmmakers are wont to portray about the island city. The film depicts the modern, cosmopolitan Singapore of condominiums, bars (along Boat Quay), cafes and restaurants, where the British protagonists mingle with their Singaporean friends (and not just other expats).

More recently, London-based Irish directors Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy made the feature *Mister John* (2013) in Singapore. The film takes a fresh look at the archetypal tale of the Western visitor in the tropics. Gerry (Aidan Gillen) arrives in Singapore to attend his brother's funeral while escaping from a troubled marriage back home. He becomes attracted to his sibling's Singaporean widow (played by Zoe Tay in a rare English film appearance), while moving through a nocturnal world of girlie bars, cheap hotels and karaoke lounges. On one hand Singapore is presented as erotic and mysterious (with hints of the supernatural and some lush jungle locations), but at the same time, it is also an ordinary place where people (both foreigners *and* Singaporeans) work through their struggles.

Hollywood's Return

In 2014, two high-profile films were shot partially in Singapore and are due for release in 2015: *Hitman: Agent 47*, a second attempt to adapt the action videogame franchise to film, features Singapore as a backdrop to some kinetic mayhem, while *Equals*, a sci-fi thriller starring Nicholas Hoult and Kristen Stewart, was shot on location in both Singapore and Japan. As the *Agent 47* trailer and poster make abundantly clear, Singapore is now sought after for its ultra-futuristic cityscapes. Interestingly, the famously prolific producer Roger Corman, who visited the *Saint Jack* set in 1978, had casually mentioned to one of the local crew that Singapore would be a perfect place to make a science fiction film. It seems, over 30 years later, that he was right. ♦

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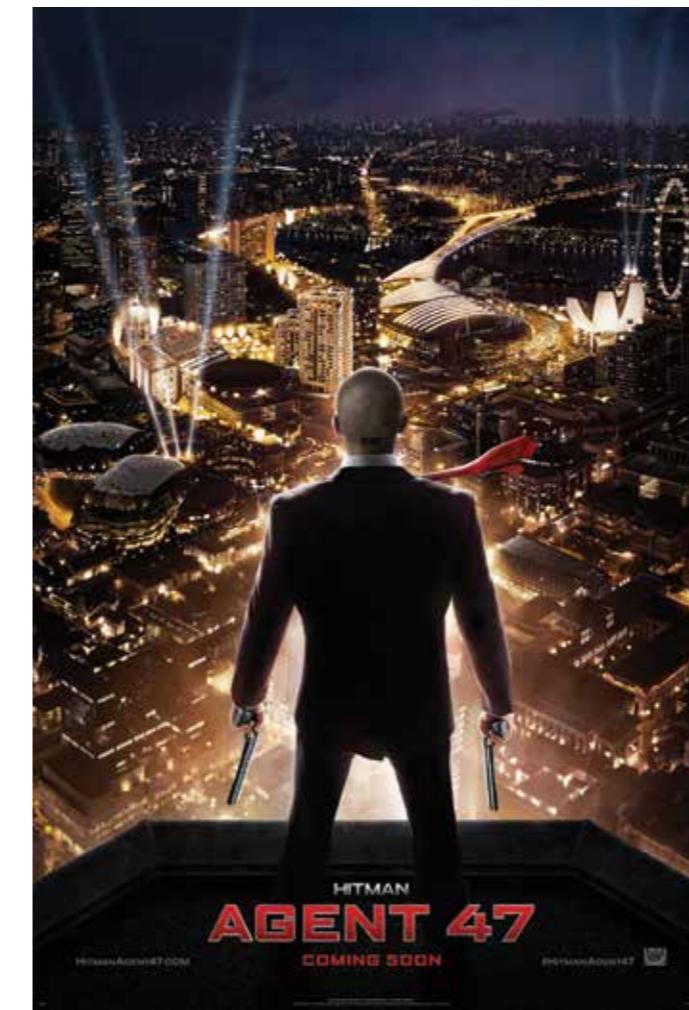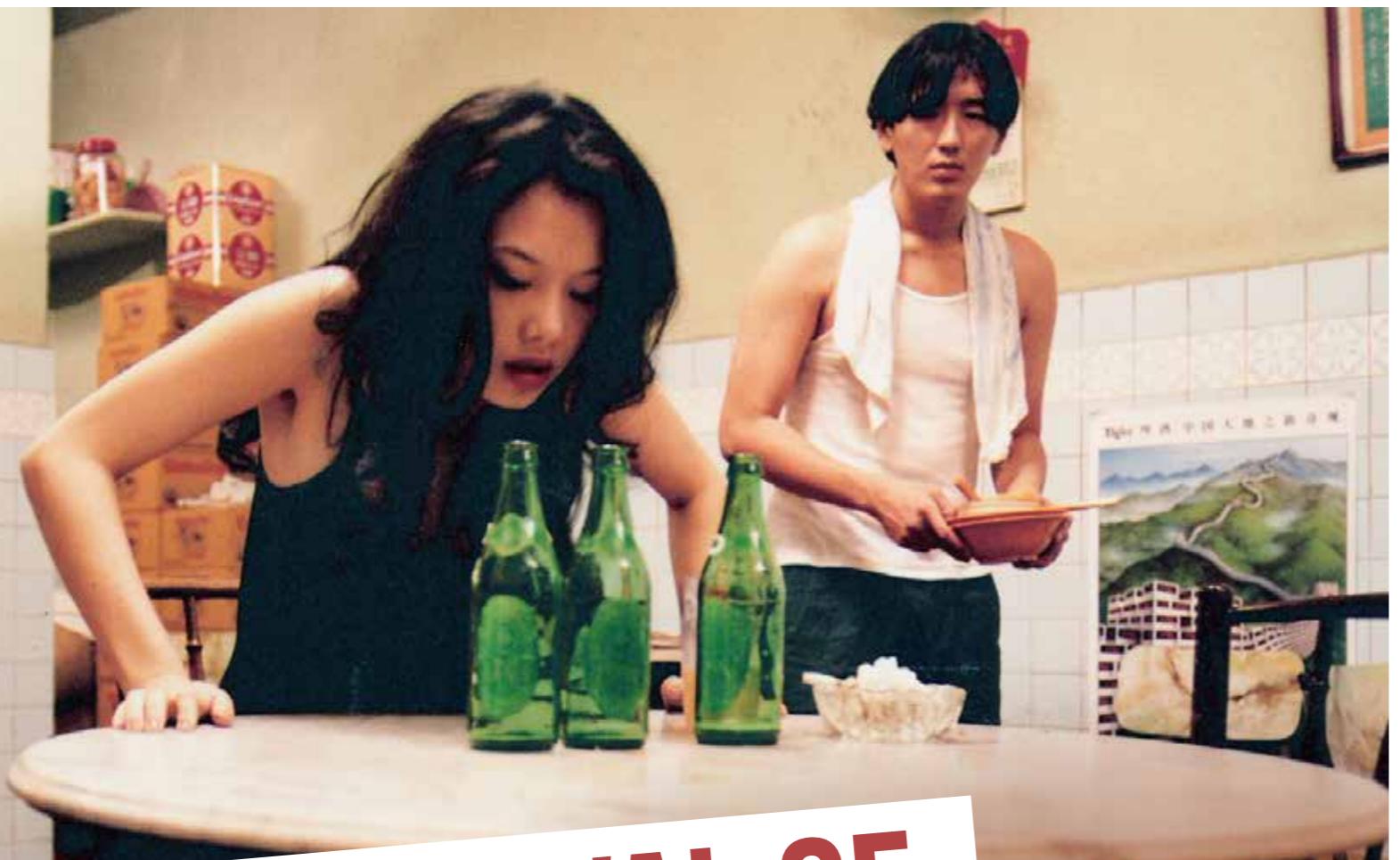
THE REVIVAL OF SINGAPOREAN CINEMA
1995—2014

Singapore's film industry gets a reboot as it enters a new phase of its development. **Raphaël Millet** explains how this resurgence came about.

Raphaël Millet is a film director, producer and critic with a passion for cinema the world over. He divides his time between France and Singapore, and has published two books about Singaporean cinema, one in French in 2004, the other in English, simply titled *Singapore Cinema*, in 2006.

Is 2015 going to be a watershed year for Singaporean cinema? Two highly symbolic events have paved the way for it, and, when taken together, encapsulate the larger picture of Singaporean film history, from its origins at the turn of the 20th century until today.

Firstly, Run Run Shaw, co-founder in 1926 of the oldest Singaporean film empire, passed away in March 2014. His death – at age 106 – brought to full closure the first great cycle of Singaporean film history (largely predating the country's Independence), and marks the passing of a bygone era of which he had been the last survivor.

Secondly, 2014 saw the return – after three years of inactivity – of the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) which, since its inception in 1987, has paved the way for what has been the gradual revival of a local film industry leading to its second historical cycle (coinciding with post-Independent Singapore). The hiatus of the festival between 2011 and 2013 was ominous, as there cannot be a serious film industry without a credible and established film festival. Fortunately, the SIFF, as it was known during its first 24 editions, is now back on track with a new acronym, SGIFF; its 25th outing in 2014 included a line-up of no less than 10 made-in-Singapore feature-length films. This is rather impressive, compared with the first few editions of the festival from 1987 to 1994 when there was very little local content to show as film-making in Singapore had ground to a halt.

The origins of the SIFF date back to 1987. In the absence of active filmmakers and producers, a small group of film buffs led by Geoffrey Malone (an Australian who had settled in Singapore in the early 1980s), with the help of two Singaporeans, Philip Cheah (who handled programming) and Teo Swee Leng (who took charge of administration) laid the foundations of the SIFF in 1987. The festival opened a new window for the expression and appreciation of the art of film, and effectively put in place part of the ecosystem needed for future film directors to emerge.

In its first few years, the SIFF saw itself as a bridge between generations, paying homage to the long-gone filmmakers of the golden age and celebrating Singapore's film heritage. In doing so, the SIFF helped to nurture new talent in the film industry. An important step was taken in that direction when the festival introduced its very first Silver Screen Awards in 1991. Open to both Singapore and regional works of film, the awards spurred emerging local directors to showcase their productions.

The Rise of Auteur Cinema

The first glimmer of hope for the revival of local cinema appeared that same year when Eric Khoo's *August* bagged the award for Best Singapore Short Film at the newly inaugurated awards. Encouraged by the award, Khoo successively directed a few more short films: *Carcass* (1992), which draws parallels between the life of a businessman and that of a butcher, and was the first local film to be given an R(A) rating; and *Pain* (1994), which recounts the story of a sado-masochistic young man, and won Khoo the Best Director and Special Achievement Awards at the 1994 edition of the festival. Unfortunately, *Pain* was

banned from public viewing in Singapore because of its graphically violent scenes. These films marked the beginning of the great revival of Singaporean cinema.

It was only in 1995 that another major step was made, led again by Khoo, then 30-years-old, with the premiere of his first feature film, the seminal *Mee Pok Man*. Symbolically, the release of the film coincided with Singapore's 30th anniversary of Independence. Khoo was to be a director of many firsts. If, when looking back, a movie were to be recognised as truly marking the revival of Singaporean cinema – the onset of the second historical cycle following that long coma – it would certainly be this movie. Locally produced, directed and acted, *Mee Pok Man* set in many respects the tone for a number of Singaporean productions that would follow in the next two decades. The film is pioneering because of its bleak social drama theme infused with angst-filled melancholy, but more importantly, it single-handedly revived the Singapore film

industry. The feat is all the more amazing when one considers the fact that *Mee Pok Man* was able to blaze a trail of its own, with none of the baggage connected with the golden age of Singaporean cinema as embodied by the Shaw and Cathay studios of yesteryear. Endowed with all the traits of an indie production, the film is clearly the work of an auteur.

Mee Pok Man was the first Singaporean feature film to be entered for the SIFF's Silver Screen Awards, and it was subsequently invited to over 30 international film festivals, including the Berlin and Venice festivals. The film effectively placed Singapore back on the map of world cinema.

Two years later, Khoo directed his second feature film, *12 Storeys*, a social drama in the vein of *Mee Pok Man* but with a more intricate structure, unveiling the lives of four different families living in the same 12-storey block of flats (hence the title). Cleverly cross-cutting between the intertwined lives of the occupants, the film sheds a bleak light into the dark corners of a depressive and eventually destructive Singaporean society – not inured from unresolved anxieties despite having been carefully socially engineered by the authorities.

(Facing page) Film still from Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, which starred Michelle Goh and Joe Ng. © Mee Pok Man. *Directed by Eric Khoo, produced by Jacqueline Khoo, distributed by Zhao Wei Films. Singapore 1995. Courtesy of Zhao Wei Films.*
(Above) Lum May Yee (left) and Koh Boon Pin (right) in *12 Storeys*. © 12 Storeys. *Directed by Eric Khoo, produced by Brian Hong, distributed by Golden Village Pictures. Singapore 1997. Courtesy of Zhao Wei Films.*

(Top) Eric Khoo (centre) during the production of *Be With Me. Courtesy of Zhao Wei Films.*
(Above) Film still of Eric Khoo's *Tatsumi*, a film inspired by the works of manga artist, Yoshihiro Tatsumi. © Tatsumi. *Directed by Eric Khoo, produced by Tan Fong Cheng, Gary Goh, Phil Mitchell, Freddie Yeo, Eric Khoo and Brian Gothong Tan, distributed by Golden Village Pictures and Happiness. Singapore, 2011. Courtesy of Zhao Wei Films.*

Always on the lookout for new talent, Eric Khoo offered Jack Neo his debut as a full-fledged cinema actor in *12 Storeys*, something that was to have long term consequences on the development of Singaporean cinema (although in a different direction from what Khoo had undertaken). While Neo had already become famous on local TV for his comedic skills, *12 Storeys* not only revealed his ability to be a big screen actor, but also showcased his ease for social drama. The film also showed Neo's ability to underplay a role (something quite rare for him, and quite the opposite of what he would generally do afterwards). Neo's exceptionally nuanced and intimate portrayal of Ah Gu's character in the movie certainly remains his

best cinematic performance yet. With *12 Storeys*, Khoo asserted even further the role to be played by auteur cinema in representing, both locally and internationally, the identity of modern Singapore. Indeed, *12 Storeys* was not only the second Singapore-made movie to be entered for the SIFF's Silver Screen Awards, but also the first Singapore film to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival as part of its Un Certain Regard programme.

During the next few years, Khoo kept himself busy producing other people's films, such as those of his then protégé Royston Tan, and only returned to direct another movie eight years later. The long-awaited *Be With Me* (2005) adopted the same artistic and thematic approach seen in *12 Storeys*.

This skillfully crafted movie spoke volumes about other unspoken sides of Singapore (such as lesbianism), and was produced right in time for the 40th anniversary of the country's Independence.

Be With Me launched the second decade of the revival of Singaporean cinema, spanning the period 2005 to 2014. By this time Singaporean cinema was alive and kicking, and Khoo proved that he was still a talent to be reckoned with. *Be With Me* premiered at the *Directors' Fortnight* section in the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, another first for Singapore. In the years that followed, Khoo remained a major proponent of Singapore arthouse cinema, with two new opuses in which he managed to renew and refresh his approach to film: *My Magic* (2008) and *Tatsumi* (2011).

With *My Magic* (2008), Khoo unexpectedly focused on the Tamil minority, shooting in Tamil, with a largely Tamil cast. It tells the heartbreaking story of a young boy and his father, a former magician. In spite of its limited acting range, largely due to the fact that the lead character was played by a non-professional actor, and the film appeared "rushed and improvised on all technical fronts" as some international media rightfully remarked, it was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival – once again a first for a Singaporean film. But in the end, *My Magic* did not win, perhaps precisely because of its acting and technical shortcomings, as well as for its overly sentimental plot.

In 2011, Khoo released what might be seen as a far more daring and refreshing film, *Tatsumi*, an animated film inspired by the works of renowned Japanese manga artist Yoshihiro Tatsumi. Set in Japan with full Japanese dialogue, Khoo dramatically departed from what has been hitherto perceived as a "Singaporean movie", thus raising many interesting issues in terms of what contributes to the identity of a national cinema. With *Tatsumi* – which featured exquisitely executed animation and was lauded by critics the world over for its beautiful graphics and excellent music score – Khoo proved that good cinema went beyond geographical borders and that Singaporean filmmakers did not have to confine themselves to filming stories set in HDB flats or shopping malls.

Tatsumi deservedly gained international recognition when it premiered in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. Yet, as with Khoo's previous Cannes' nominations, it did not win, and this once again tempered his achievements. A further setback was in store: although the film was selected as the Singaporean entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the

84th Academy Awards, it did not make it to the final shortlist of nominated movies.

In spite of these minor setbacks, Khoo's contribution to the revival of Singaporean cinema is not diminished. He set the direction and the standards for an auteur cinema where an independent director's personal creative vision is paramount, free from the stresses of commercial goals or worries. With his "film for the sake of film" attitude, Khoo inspired numerous directors who emerged at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Glen Goei, Djinn Ong, Kelvin Tong and Royston Tan, among others.

Djinn Ong's career, although very promising, was largely short-lived, with only two feature films to his directorial credit. *Return to Pontianak* (2001) was Singapore's first attempt at revisiting the horror film genre left fallow since the early 1970s (some of Ong's peers, like Kelvin Tong, would explore this genre a few years later). Ong's second film, *Perth* (2004) tells the story of Harry Lee, a security supervisor at a shipyard who, after losing his job due to brutal downsizing, is forced to become a driver in order to make a living, with hopes of one day retiring in Australia.

Unfortunately, Ong discontinued his filmmaking work partly due to personal reasons and did not have a chance to take part in the second decade of the Singaporean cinema revival from 2005 to 2014 – a pity, as *Perth* had a grittiness rarely seen until then in Singapore films, and still stands out precisely for this.

Royston Tan and Kelvin Tong opted for more hybrid careers, oscillating between the desire of being perceived as ambitious arthouse auteurs and the temptation of trying their hand – although not always with great success – at commercial cinema, the other avenue increasingly open to local filmmakers.

Royston Tan, for instance, has moved from the controversial *15* (2003) to the bleak Eric Khoo-inspired *4:30* (2005), before delving into the blatantly commercial and artistically kitsch *881* (2007). While *15* was heavily censored due to its graphic portrayal of teenage gangsterism (the film had to undergo numerous cuts before it was eventually released) *881* was a boisterous musical comedy – interspersed with occasional dramatic moments – and went on to become a box-office hit. In doing so, Tan has gone from one extreme end of the spectrum to the other, blurring the lines of his directional style in the process. The only constant has been his predilection for movie titles with numbers. His last feature film, *12 Lotus* (2008) is his most mature work so far, finding the right balance between a good drama and a fun, easy-going film.

With his "film for the sake of film" attitude, Eric Khoo inspired numerous directors who emerged at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s, such as Djinn Ong, Kelvin Tong and Royston Tan, among others.

(Top) Lim Kay Tong in *Perth: The Geylang Massacre.* © Perth: The Geylang Massacre. *Directed by Djinn Ong, distributed by Tartan Films. Singapore, 2004.*
(Above) Royston Tan's *881* explores the colourful world of *getai.* © 881. *Directed by Royston Tan, produced by Gary Goh, James Toh, Chan Pui Yin, Freddie Yeo, Tan Fong Cheng and Ang Hwee Sim, distributed by Golden Village Pictures. Singapore, 2007.*

The Rise of Commercial Cinema

At the exact opposite end of Eric Khoo on the spectrum of Singaporean film genres stands Jack Neo. He is the other notable film director in the last two decades with a body of work even superior in quantity – but perhaps not in quality, although a comparison might not be really valid here – to the work of Khoo.

Jack Neo started off as a multitalented TV entertainer, and then went on to act in film (debuting in Khoo's *12 Storeys*) before becoming a prolific director, often acting in his own movies. All along Neo remained active in television and successfully retained a large popular base, which in turn benefited his ventures into film – at least commercially, if not always artistically. Indeed, Neo quickly became the most profitable ("bankable", some would say) director in the Singaporean movie industry, almost continuously dominating the local box office for close to 20 consecutive years with his highly popular comedies.

Neo's first venture into this genre was the 1998 *Money No Enough*, which he did not direct himself but instead wrote and played the lead of a middle-class Chinese Singaporean who does not speak fluent English nor have high educational qualifications and who faces difficulties at work. With Mark Lee playing the role of a contractor in debt to loan sharks and Henry Thia as a coffeeshop waiter obsessed with girls, Neo managed to intertwine personal stories of men caught in everyday troubles, but in a far less subtle (but far more hilarious) way than Khoo's nuanced and multilayered melancholic style. The Singaporean audience loved it, and the film was such a runaway success that it became the top-grossing movie ever in the country, a title it kept for about 13 years. *Money No Enough* shot Jack Neo to immediate cinema stardom and gave the Singapore film industry a gigantic – and much needed – boost.

The hapless misadventures of the comic trio in *Money No Enough* became one of Neo's trademarks, soon recycled in 1999

A film still from *Ah Boys to Men*. © Ah Boys to Men. Directed by Jack Neo, produced by Jack Neo, Lim Teck and Leonard Lao, distributed by Golden Village Pictures & Clover Films. Singapore, 2012. Courtesy of J Team Productions.

in both *Liang Po Po – The Movie* (which, again he wrote but did not direct) and *That One No Enough* (which, finally, he directed). In both films, Neo poked fun at Singaporeans' idiosyncrasies. Once again, Singaporeans loved it, and both movies were box-office hits, even though they did not break *Money No Enough*'s record.

With *That One No Enough*, Neo embarked on a directing career that turned him into Singapore's most prolific filmmaker, directing a total of 18 feature films within 16 years (from 1998 to 2014). Some critics found him a bit too prolific to be consistently good all the time, and it is true that some of his comedies were not as commercially successful – sometimes because they were just not as funny as his previous efforts. The truth is that making people laugh is far more difficult than making people cry – be it when writing a book, staging a play or directing a movie. So far, despite his highs and lows, Neo has done a pretty good job at making Singaporeans laugh at themselves, something much needed for the morale and psychological sanity of a nation not often known for its self-deprecating humour.

Neo has humorously addressed major local issues such as the irresistible drive for money *(That One No Enough)*, its fascination with gambling *(The Best Bet)*, the pressure-cooker education system *(I Not Stupid)*, national service as a rite of passage *(Ah Boys to Men)*, and others. As a matter of fact, Neo's strength lies in having his finger right on Singapore's pulse, knowing what his fellow Singaporeans are currently obsessing over, while at the same time managing to keep it just within a hair's

breadth of the perceived out-of-boundary markers in Singapore society. If you can be sure about one thing about Neo, it is that he knows his OB markers. This is one of the primary reasons for his commercial success at filmmaking.

Yet, Jack Neo's main shortcomings as a filmmaker are to be found in the all too often poor production value of his movies. Indeed, many are no more than telemovies projected onto the big screen, sometimes unconvincingly (if not badly) acted, sometimes technically lame, as in the case of *I Do I Do*, *The Best Bet*, and *Lion Men*. This is most regrettable as Neo is talented and can do much better when he sets his mind to it, something he has proven with *I Not Stupid* (2002), and even more so with *Homerun* (2003).

Although *Homerun* re-casted some of the children who acted in *I Not Stupid*, the film departed from Neo's usual style and displayed, for the first time, true artistic ambition on his part as a director. A remake of Iranian Majid Majidi's critically acclaimed arthouse movie *Children of Heaven* (1997), *Homerun* – transplanted into the Singapore landscape – explored new territory by being the first large-scale period movie to be made locally. But instead of re-staging the major political and social events that shook Singapore in 1965, it placed them in the background of a main plot that focused on a brother and sister from a poor family. Well crafted (with carefully selected locations in neighbouring Malaysia giving the movie an air of authenticity), it was most of all superbly acted by some very promising young actors. Deservedly, one of its leads, 10-year-old Megan Zheng, won the Best

New Performer Award at the 40th Golden Horse Film Festival, clinching the first ever Golden Horse Award for Singapore. With this win, Neo had proven that Eric Khoo was not the only one to be counted on when it came to "firsts" in terms of international recognition. This was a major success for Singapore's revived cinema industry.

Curiously, following *Homerun*'s success, Neo went back to his previous low production value films, with *The Best Bet* (2005), *I Do I Do* (2006) and *Just Follow Law* (2007), generally churning them out in time for release at Chinese New Year. But Neo soon entered the second decade of the Singaporean film revival with a new strategy that proved rather fruitful: he started making sequels to his previous successes, while at the same time creating new movies conceived as franchises to reap greater economies of scale.

The first sequel was *I Not Stupid Too* in 2006, revisiting more or less the same story four years after the first film. Following the same vein, Neo also directed *Money No Enough 2*, exactly a decade after the original, once again poking fun at his fellow Singaporeans still engaged in an endless pursuit of money. The sequel recipe proved lucrative, with *I Not Stupid Too* beating its predecessor at the box office, and *Money No Enough 2* coming very close to the record gains of his 1998 *Money No Enough*.

In 2012, Neo finally surpassed himself with *Ah Boys to Men*, earning more than S$6 million domestically, something absolutely unheard of until then. A year later, in 2013, this record was beaten by *Ah Boys to Men 2,* which made S$7 million at the local box-office. The *Ah Boys to Men* franchise, perhaps the first of its sort in the history of Singaporean cinema, dealt with the misadventures of a group of young army recruits doing their National Service, something which has always been a source of great bonding and joshing around among Singaporean men. That same theme had already been brought to screen in the form of a comedy as early as 1996 with Ong Ken Sen's *Army Daze*. The film had been a relative success then, but nothing compared to Neo's box-office tsunami.

Looking back at Jack Neo's accomplishments over the last 15 years or so, it would appear that he has almost singlehandedly created locally made commercial films that can make a windfall. But the truth is that Neo, alone, has almost entirely occupied that space. Many have tried to copy Neo in the hope of replicating his success, but this has generally been in vain. Jack Neo's recipe for box-office success is a closely guarded secret.

A New Generation with Potential

In the second decade of the revival, a new generation of filmmakers, some of them owing very little to either Eric Khoo or Jack Neo, has emerged. There are too many of them to name, but four – Ho Tzu Nyen, Boo Junfeng, Anthony Chen and Ken Kwek – stand out, largely because of the distinctive intrinsic qualities of their works.

Ho Tzu Nyen is not just a filmmaker. He is one of Singapore's most versatile multidisciplinary artists, approaching art first and foremost in terms of multimedia. For him, cinema is just one means of expression among the variety of multimedia works he excels in. One of Ho's seminal breakthrough works was *Utama – Every Name in History is I* (2003), which consisted of a video and 20 portrait paintings, cleverly playing with the founding narratives of Singapore. He completed his first, and so far only feature film, *HERE* in 2009. This allegorical film shot in a mock-documentary style is set in a mental institution (the Island Hospital), where a traumatised man is forced to adjust to life in this confined place while undergoing experimental treatment. Beneath the surface, the Island Hospital is an obvious metaphor for Singapore, and the entire film is a grim and rather frightening commentary on the excesses of social engineering. *HERE* was selected for screening at the 41st Directors' Fortnight section at Cannes in 2009.

In 2010, another young Singaporean director, Boo Junfeng, completed his first feature film, *Sandcastle*. Boo is not entirely new to the film scene as he has had a series of notable short films to his credit, such as *Katong Fugue* (2007), *Keluar Baris* (2008) and *Tanjong Rhu* (2009). But his debut feature took him to another level when it became the first Singaporean film to be invited to the prestigious International Critics' Week at the 2010 Cannes International Film Festival. *Sandcastle*, produced by Eric Khoo's company Zhao Wei Films, tells the story of an 18-year-old boy who finds out, through his grandparents, that his father who died of cancer a few years earlier, was once part of a group of political activists in the early years of Singapore's Independence. This leads the young man on the brink of adulthood to reassess the official history of his country, and to reflect on the lack of idealism in a society driven mainly by pragmatism. Clearly, this is another bold commentary on Singapore's societal, political and historical journey.

Similarly, Anthony Chen honed his filmmaking skills through a variety of short films that have always displayed great potential, as seen in his first film, *G-23* (2004), *Ah Ma* (2007) and *Haze* (2008). Chen's debut feature film *Ilo Ilo* (2013) chronicled the

difficult adjustments a Singaporean family has to make when they hire a Filipino maid – until they have to let her go when the Asian financial crisis in 1997 hits them hard. The movie met with considerable success when it was featured at the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes 2013, and went one step further than any other Singaporean film had accomplished so far by winning the coveted Caméra d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, and four awards at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards the same year: Best Feature Film, Best New Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actress.

Interestingly, although *Ilo Ilo* is the first and so far the only Singaporean win at Cannes, it initially received a conflicted review from a Singaporean film critic disturbed that recognition for the film should come from abroad first. This is altogether not unexpected; winning an international film award prior to being feted in the domestic market is a common phenomenon in the film industry, and the accolades the film has received are definitively something to be proud of. Moreover, *Ilo Ilo* fared reasonably well at the domestic box-office, proving that even local arthouse movies can sometimes be commercial successes in Singapore.

Finally, in late 2014, a new film director emerged in the person of Ken Kwek, with his debut feature *Unlucky Plaza* (2014) – the title a provocative metaphor of modern Singapore. Kwek had already been on the radar for his more controversial *Sex. Violence. Family Values* (2012) that was banned in Singapore. Fortunately, *Unlucky Plaza* did not suffer the same fate and was chosen to open the reborn SGIFF. The film's strength lies in the fact that it managed to bring together all the things that make for

a good independent arthouse film as well as the characteristics of what are usually perceived to be the hallmarks of a successful commercial movie. Intertwining destinies – the naive entrepreneur, the ubiquitous property agent, the loan shark, etc. – in a manner reminiscent of both Eric Khoo's and Jack Neo's styles, *Unlucky Plaza* portrays Singapore as a city-state devoured by greed in more ways than one. The film cleverly pulls it off by permanently oscillating between an irresistibly funny comedy and a riveting drama on society.

What the Future Holds

As Singapore prepares to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its Independence in 2015, so too is Eric Khoo; he was born in 1965 and will celebrate his own 50th birthday this year. This conjunction of dates is highly symbolic as Khoo is the person who has almost single-handedly sparked the revival of Singaporean

cinema. Although Khoo remains one of the leading lights of local film, he is not as isolated as he was when he first started his career because several other filmmakers of note have emerged over the years.

If Khoo spearheaded what could be hailed as the first wave of directors from 1995 to 2004 and was immediately followed in this path by Jack Neo, Djinn Ong and Kelvin Tong, among others, one certainly cannot ignore the second wave of younger directors from 2005 to 2014. Filmmakers such as Boo Junfeng, Anthony Chen and, most recently, Ken Kwek, have pushed Singaporean cinema into new directions and brought local film to new levels of domestic and international recognition.

Let us go back to the question that was raised at the start of this essay: Is 2015 set to mark the start of a new decade of greater achievements for Singaporean cinema? The potential is there, and the ecosystem that makes it possible for a film industry

to exist and thrive is now largely in place, unlike what it was like 15 or even only 10 years ago. Film studies are more prevalent in Singapore thanks to an efflorescence of film schools. Government support is also accessible for the most part, covering some of the essential steps needed for a film to materialise, from scriptwriting to development, and production to distribution.

Yet, the Singaporean film industry, after lying dormant for so many years, has had to start from ground zero, and is therefore still a fledgling one. The truth is that apart from Jack Neo, Eric Khoo, Royston Tan and Kelvin Tong, very few currently active directors have had the experience of making more than two or three features in their entire careers. Even filmmakers like Glen Goei, who started directing as early as the mid-1990s, found it difficult to go beyond their second feature film. After *Forever Fever* (1997) and *Blue Mansion* (2009), there was another long drought in Goei's work in film

until he recently began work on his remake of *Pontianak* – his homage to Singapore's golden age of Malay filmmaking from 1947 to 1972. *Pontianak* is due for release in 2017.

Furthermore, with the exception of some of Neo's blockbusters, the domestic film market is still not financially sustainable. After years of selections and nominations, Singapore films have only recently started winning international accolades, as in the case of Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*. Many challenges still await the local film industry, which, after surviving a near comatose period in the 1980s, is slowly coming back to life. If the stars are all aligned, Singapore cinema might finally be on its way to a true renaissance. ◆

(Above left) Bobbi Chen and Joshua Tan in Boo Junfeng's 2010 *Sandcastle*. © Sandcastle. *Directed by Boo Junfeng, produced by Fran Borgia & Gary Goh, distributed by Golden Village Pictures. Singapore, 2010. Courtesy of Zhao Wei Films.*
(Above) Angeli Bayani and Jieler Koh in *Ilo Ilo*. © Ilo Ilo. *Directed by Anthony Chen, produced by Ang Hwee Sim, Anthony Chen, Wahyuni A Hadi, distributed by Golden Village Pictures. Singapore, 2013.*
(Far left) The late Chuen Boone Ong in his role as Monsters Man in Ho Tzu Nyen's 2009 *HERE*. *Directed by Ho Tzu Nyen, produced by Fran Borgia, Michel Cayla and Jason Lai, distributed by Cathay-Keris Films (Singapore). Singapore, 2009. Courtesy of Ho Tzu Nyen.*
(Left) Adrian Pang in *Unlucky Plaza*. *Directed by Ken Kwek, produced by Ken Kwek, Kat Goh and Leon Tong. Singapore. 2014. © Kaya Toast Pictures.*

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MY MOVIE MEMORABILIA

Wong Han Min's treasure trove of film memorabilia – collected over three decades – provides a glimpse of Singapore's rich cinematic past.

1. Venus Theatre opening souvenir, 1964. Venus Theatre opened in Queenstown in 1964 and closed in 1985 and was later converted into a church.
2. Record of local Mandarin film *Lion City*. Produced in 1960 by Cathay-Keris, the film was Singapore's first Malayan-Mandarin film and was produced to celebrate the attainment of self-government in Singapore.
3. Leaflet (1920s) for Charles Chaplin's *A Day's Pleasure*, which played at Surina Theatre. The theatre, owned by the Surin family and located at North Bridge Road, was open from 1922 to 1930.
4. Advertising envelope of *The Ten Commandments*, which was screened at Cathay Cinema in 1956.

All images courtesy of Wong Han Min.

Wong Han Min is a philatelist and collector of ephemera relating to Singapore's social history. His collection of film-related memorabilia is particularly outstanding, and has been featured in various publications. Wong has given talks and held exhibitions of his collections both locally and overseas, and recently collaborated with the Hong Kong Film Archive on the exhibition "The Foundation of Run Run Shaw's Cinema Empire".

Given the diverse range of movie-related memorabilia available, aficionados can easily amass huge collections over time. These can include cinema tickets, posters, scripts and other ephemera to film props and costumes as well as bulkier items like cinema seats, cinema projectors and studio camera sets – in short everything related to filmmaking and cinemas.

I saw my first movie when I was five. My parents had taken me to watch a Taiwanese tear-jerker at the now defunct Kong Chian cinema in Toa Payoh. I will never forget that magical evening, enveloped in the darkness and ensconced in my own seat, my feet barely touching the floor. I have been hooked on movies ever since. Cinemas back then only had one hall, which was usually huge and grand; the screen was often equally large and had the effect of drawing and absorbing you into the movie experience. As my trips to the cinema were infrequent at best while growing up, I treasured each and every film I watched.

Unfortunately, rapid urbanisation and development, coupled with the introduction of the videotape and other forms of entertainment, caused many cinemas in Singapore to close down in the 1980s. As the number of movie-goers dipped and the film industry declined, I felt compelled to document the loss of these grand movie houses with detailed photographs and ticket stubs. Later on, I expanded my collection to include other film-related memorabilia, and because the items are so diverse, I chose to focus on local productions and films with Asian content. Before I started my collection, I was unaware that Singapore was home to a booming film industry in the late 1940s into the early 70s, but as my collection grew larger, so did my knowledge about Singapore's golden age of filmmaking. My curiosity was piqued, and my hobby has been growing from strength to strength over the last 30 years.

Initially I faced many challenges; besides having limited means to buy items, there were also space constraints and discouragement from my family (my mum, needless to say, grew increasingly impatient with the clutter gathering in my room). But like-minded friends and people I met in the film business encouraged me. One incident sticks in my memory: in 2006, a warehouse that belonged to the Eng Wah Organisation was destroyed by a fire. What was left of the building was earmarked for demolition but before the bulldozers could tear the building down, I managed to rummage through the rubble and save whatever I could find that was of historical value. I salvaged some paper ephemera but the fire had sadly destroyed all the extant film reels. Searching for film memorabilia is not always so dramatic but neither is it easy. From collector friends to the *karung guni* (rag-and-bone man), and flea markets, antique shops and online auction sites to overseas trips, I am always on the lookout for a piece of history that helps tell the Singapore film story.

My lifelong passion for all things connected to films originally started from a place of loss and nostalgia. To me, an artefact that is destroyed or lost translates into a larger (and permanent) loss of Singapore's history and heritage; this is what fuels my passion to discover and preserve Singapore's cinematic history through the items I gather.

Over the past three decades, my collection has evolved into a sizable private archive of memorabilia that celebrates Singapore's multicultural film and cinema history, one that is closely intertwined with the personal memories of generations of Singaporeans who have grown up watching films – in much the same way I have. ◆
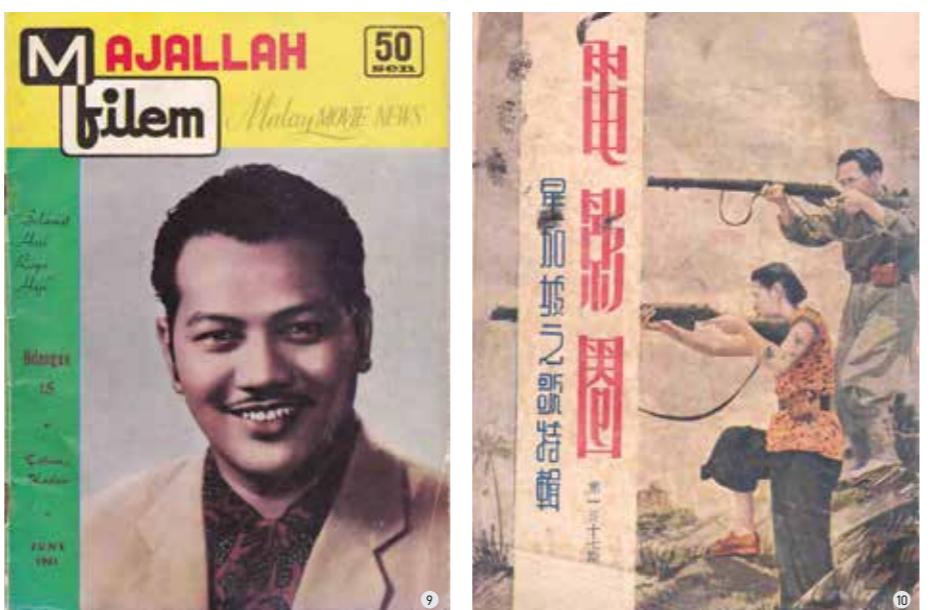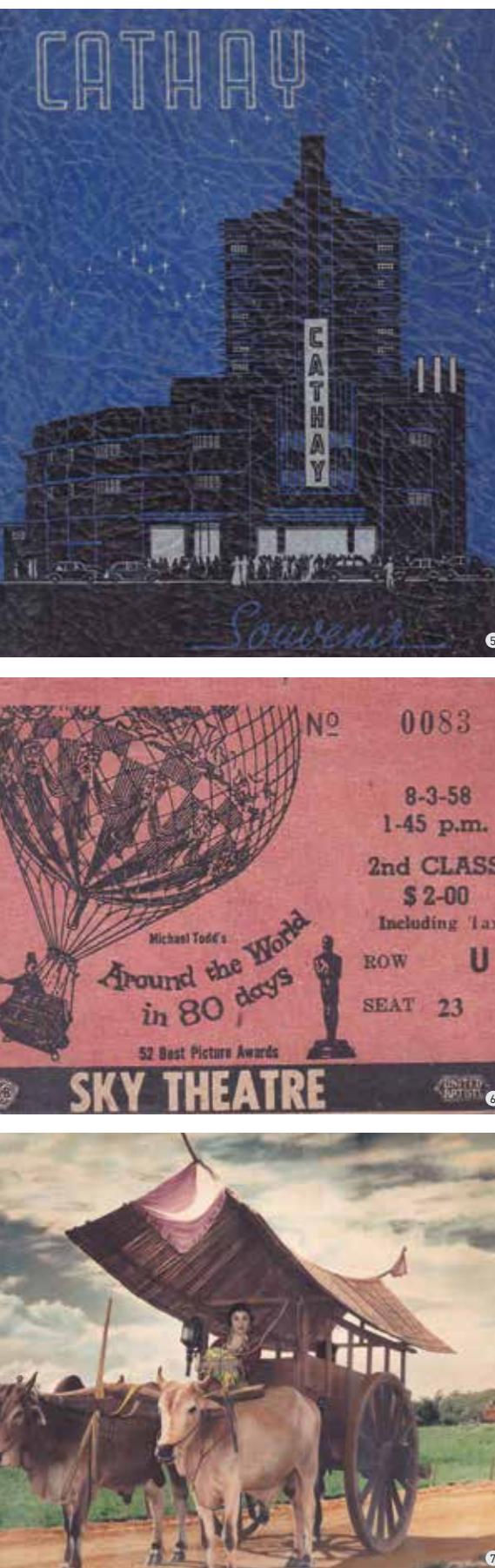
As the number of movie-goers dipped and the film industry declined, I felt compelled to document the loss of these grand movie houses with detailed photographs and ticket stubs.

5. Cathay Cinema opening souvenir (1939). Cathay Cinema opened in 1939 and has since been the flagship theatre of Cathay Organisation in Singapore.

6. Sky Theatre ticket of the opening show *Around the World in 80 Days* in 1958. Under Shaw Organisation, Sky Theatre opened in 1958 at Great World Amusement Park. It closed in 1978.

7. Hand-coloured still of *Nonya and Baba*, produced by Cathay Organisation in 1956, starring famous Chinese actress Li Lihua in Peranakan dressing.

8. Lobby card of *Hotel Murder Case* (1963), an Amoy-dialect (Hokkien) film starring Singapore's famous *getai* ("song stage") singer Zhuang Xuefang (in yellow).

9. June 1961 issue of *Malay Movie News* with P. Ramlee on the cover. The magazine was produced by Shaw Organisation and featured Malay films made by Shaw's Malay Film Productions (MFP) Studios at Jalan Ampas.

10. Issue No. 117 of *Screen Voice*, a Chinese film magazine produced by Shaw Brothers. This issue focused on *Song of Singapore*, a local film produced at Shaw's studios.

11. Postcards produced by Cathay and Odeon cinemas, announcing upcoming movie releases in 1955.

12. Movie flyer for *Amrapali*, a Hindi film screened at Galaxy Cinema on Vesak Day in 1967. Galaxy Cinema screened mostly Indian films and operated from 1965 to 1981.

13. & 14. Ticket stubs showing the name of the cinema and a picture of an actress on one side and your weight on the reverse.

15. Weighing machines such as this one from Lux Cinema, the last surviving old cinema in Hong Kong, were once common in Singapore's cinemas.

All images courtesy of Wong Han Min.

CRAZY BUMPKINS IN SINGAPORE

> What was left of the building was earmarked for demolition but before the bulldozers could tear it down, I managed to rummage through the rubble and save whatever I could find that was of historical value.

16. Lobby card of Shaw's Cantonese film *Crazy Bumpkins in Singapore* was shot on location in Singapore in 1976, starring the city's famous comedians Wang Sa and Ye Fung. This comedic duo hit the big screens in the early 1970s (after gaining popularity on TV) when they were employed by Shaw Studios in Hong Kong.

17. A 1908 postcard of Theatre Royal which opened in 1908 on North Bridge Road. It became a full-fledged cinema in 1928 and closed in 1977 to make way for Blanco Court building. Part of Raffles Hospital now stands in its location.

18. A postcard advertising the film, *Wings*, in 1929.

19. An envelope promoting *Wedding Bells for Hedy*, a Chinese film produced by Cathay Organisation in 1960.

20. A bookmark promoting the 1966 MFP film, *Jefri Zain - Gerak Kilat (Operation Lightning),* which starred Jins Samsuddin, Singapore's own James Bond.

21. A leaflet advertising the screening of Warner Bros' film, *School Days*, screening at Alhambra cinema in 1924.
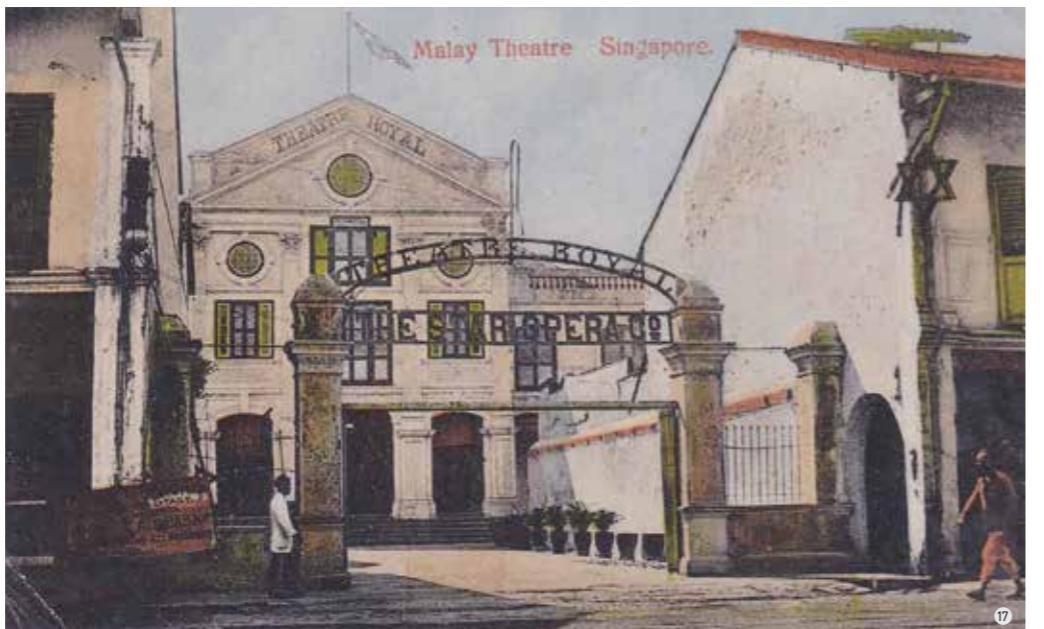
All images courtesy of Wong Han Min.
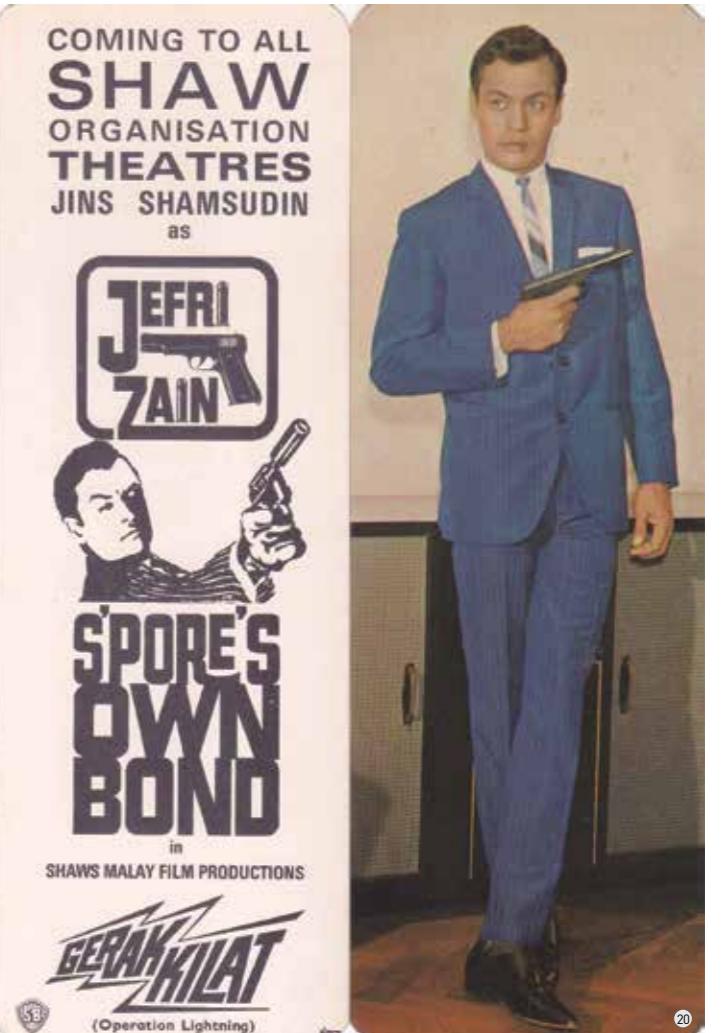
CULTURE ON CELLULOID

Alternative Films in Singapore

Intellectual and art house films have a long history in Singapore but the issues the genre faces have changed little over the years. **Gracie Lee** charts the challenges of alternative cinema in our city.

Gracie Lee is a Senior Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. Her responsibilities include managing the ephemera collection, and developing and providing content and reference services relating to Singapore.

The beginnings of the art house cinema originated in France during the early 1920s in response to the growing commercialisation of films by Hollywood. After World War I, pioneering French film companies such as Gaumont and Pathé, which once dominated the European motion picture industry, began losing out to big budget Hollywood productions. In response, French producers began experimenting with new approaches to filmmaking, paving the way for the emergence of the French avant-garde film.

At the same time, an intellectual film culture took root in France, giving rise to the publication of film reviews in journals and newspapers, the establishment of specialist theatres and the proliferation of film societies called cine-clubs which held regular screenings of non-mainstream films such as art films, political films and retrospectives. Forums were also held for filmmakers and enthusiasts to meet and discuss the art of cinema. The cine-clubs were very successful and began to spread throughout Europe. In Britain, the London Film Society was established in 1925.

The Dominance of Hollywood

The allure of the cinematograph for mass entertainment was phenomenal, extending its global reach to Singapore. Movie-watching was such a popular past time in this British colony that it prompted a reader of the *Malaya Tribune* to declare the 1930s as the "Cinema Age".[1] In 1929, a *Straits Times* editorial reported that "almost every small town in Malaya possesses its cinema",[2] and as early as 1917, an Eastern Kinematograph Association had been formed to protect the interests of exhibitors here.[3]

By the 1930s, Hollywood had firmly entrenched its foothold in Singapore. Prewar figures estimate that 70 percent of films shown in Singapore were American, 16 percent British and 13 percent Chinese, with the remaining from India, Java and Egypt. The stranglehold of American films was reinforced by the presence of major Hollywood distribution offices in Singapore, many of which were located along Orchard Road, including First-National (1926; later Warner Bros-First National), Fox Film (1927), United Artists (1928), Famous Players-Lasky Corporation (1929, reorganised as Paramount in 1931) and Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer (1933).

A Difficult Singapore Audience

In 1933, long-time Singapore resident Roland Braddell wrote that the Singaporean audience was an "extraordinarily difficult" one. "They either like a picture or they don't; direction, technique, lighting, photography, and the finer points of acting mean nothing. The Asiatic taste makes or mars a picture, and the results are startling. Thus four gold medal

(Facing page) Publicity poster for the third French film festival – Rendezvous with French Cinema – in 2013. *Collection of National Library, Singapore.*

pictures, *Cimarron*, *Smilin' Through*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Grand Hotel* were failures, while that magnificent picture *Farewell to Arms* flopped so hard that you could hear it in China...On the other hand, *Pleasure Cruise*, an ordinary programme picture, made plenty. Comedy, music, and love interest are what the Asiatics appear to like, and anything historical leaves them cold... the greatest financial successes in Singapore so far have been *Love Parade*, *Sunnyside Up*, *Tarzan*, *East of Borneo*, and *Samarang*..."[4]

One *Straits Times* headline quipped, Malayan movie-goers "prefer Tarzan to serious films".[5] The article went on to elaborate that audiences enjoyed action films, cowboy, Tarzan and serial features but films with lots of dialogue or psychological stories were not popular.

Cynics would say that little has changed today as far as the maturity of Singapore film audiences is concerned – the commercial and mainstream still rule over the art house.

Calls for a Film Society

Despite the grim picture, the influence of film societies and film appreciation in Europe was beginning to make its mark in Singapore. In 1933, *The Straits Times* carried a public notice that "proposed to form an Amateur Film Society in Singapore"[6] though it is not known if any readers responded to the call. In 1936, another reader advocated the setting up of a film society, adding that "it is the only thing which will save [Singapore] from complete aesthetic stagnation".[7] This would give Singaporeans a chance to view European and Russian films that commercial exhibitors did not import, and which did not come under the heavy-handed cuts by the Official Censor.

The following year, *The Straits Times* published a scathing forum letter about the sorry state of film culture in Singapore. "Singapore wants to see intelligent films", the writer opined, adding that "it is time the farce of denying Singapore cinemagoers intelligent films ceased. Censorship – which presents abnormal difficulties in Singapore – has robbed filmgoers here of seeing such fine films...because they were 'unsuitable' for Malayan audiences'. A Film Society is the only way out for those who regard films as an art, who want to see more than the commercial productions of Hollywood and Elstree [Britain's equivalent of Hollywood]."[8]

The letter found popular support: One reader responded, "We are so surfeited with American films, that the 'differentness' of a good European picture is a refreshing experience. In a cosmopolitan city like Singapore, one would imagine that there would be a public for such as a film society." Another

said, "The plea...is a reminder of Singapore's cultural anaemia".[9]

While Singapore mulled over setting up a film society, Kuala Lumpur went ahead and formed the Malayan Film Society on 6 October 1947. The 120-member society was headed by Jack Evans, the newly appointed Film Censor for Malaya. Two of its objectives were "to afford members opportunities of seeing and discussing Indian, Chinese, and English films which might not normally be seen in public cinemas" and "to promote interest in the production of Malayan films."[10] In practice though, the society's line-up comprised mainly European productions. Examples of films screened include *The World is Rich* (1947), a black-and-white British documentary on world food scarcity after World War II; *The Magic Bow* (1946), a British musical on the life of Italian composer Paganini; and acclaimed French film noir *Quai des Orfevres* (1947). By 1953, however, the society was no longer in existence. The vacuum was filled by the thriving Selangor Film Society, which had over 900 members at one point.

The Singapore Film Society

The official history of the Singapore Film Society (SFS) dates its beginnings to the expatriate community in 1958. However, newspaper sources point to a precursor of the film society in 1948 through the initiative of some like-minded locals. This earlier film society, also called the Singapore Film Society – presided by Tan Thoon Lip (Singapore's first Asian registrar of the Supreme Court) with Lim Choo Sye as secretary – started with 50 members of different races and backgrounds, which later increased to 100. It aimed to "enable its members to see more specialised, historic, educational and artistic films than is possible in the ordinary cinema",[11] and to "[instil] a better appreciation of films in the large Singapore film-going public".[12] Modelled after film societies in Britain, SFS' members paid a subscription of $20 to see 24 films a year.

The SFS' first screening was held at Cathay Cinema and opened with three films: *The World is Rich*, a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award winner and an Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary; *The Centre*; and *Cyrus*. Thereafter, the society held most of its screenings, comprising a repertoire of features, shorts, documentaries and cartoons, at the Victoria Theatre and the British Council Hall at Stamford Road. Its members were privy to films such as *Girl of My Dreams* (1944), a German wartime romance; *Alexander Nevsky* (1938); Walt Disney's *Bambi* (1942); and *Nasib* (1949), a locally produced Malay film by the Shaw Brothers.

The Blue Angel is one of the earliest art house films to be screened in Singapore. © The Blue Angel. *Directed by Josef von Sternberg, produced by Erich Pommer, distributed by UFA Paramount Pictures, Weimar Republic, 1930.*

To enhance the appreciation of the films, the SFS organised talks to tie in with the films. For instance, at the screening of *English Criminal Justice*, the chief justice of Singapore, Sir Charles Murray-Aynsley spoke about the film and English law, while R.E. Holttum, Professor of Botany at the University of Malaya, was invited to speak at the screening of *Story of Plant Life*.

By 1950, however, the SFS was in dire financial difficulties. The high cost of hiring films, heavy entertainment tax, limited screening facilities, and difficulties in procuring films were crippling the society. Moreover, the society had to rely on the services of local distributors because it was not allowed to import films directly. As part of its cost-cutting measures, the society screened 16 mm films at members' homes. Despite these valiant efforts, news about the society's activities ceased around 1950, and it was clear that by 1953 the society was no longer functioning.

On 15 October 1954, however, efforts to revive a film society were mounted and a committee comprising mainly expatriates was formed with Eric Mottram as president. Mottram, who was a lecturer at the University of Malaya and later a key figure in Britain's poetry revival of the 1960s, had

a long association with film societies in Britain. The society began functioning again with 185 members to aid the "promotion and appreciation of good films among its members with membership open to people of all races".[13]

For its first presentation, *The Blue Angel* (1930) was screened at the British Council Hall. The movie, which propelled actress Marlene Dietrich into international stardom, traces the descent of a sanctimonious professor after he becomes entranced by Lola Lola, the headline act at a local cabaret called "The Blue Angel". The tragicomedy is regarded as the first major German sound film and a fine showcase of German expressionism. SFS' premiere screening played to a packed audience in Singapore. A hundred people had to be turned away at the door and a repeat screening was arranged.

Since its revival, the SFS has been pivotal in forging an alternative film culture in Singapore through its presentations of artistic and experimental films of merit. From the 1960s to 1980s, the society struggled to be in the black, faced with increased costs while trying to grow its membership base. Nonetheless, the society maintained its policy of creative and daring programming, leveraging on partnerships with foreign cultural institutions and commercial exhibitors to deliver a different cinematic experience for audiences. In 1984, the SFS and the Kelab Seni Filem Malaysia (Malaysia Film Society) became affiliates, allowing members from both sides to enjoy reciprocal benefits.

Today, the SFS holds over 200 screenings a year and 75 percent of its members are locals. It established its permanent home at GV Marina in 1996. In 2015, the society moved to GV Suntec when the Marina cineplex closed down. The society has been a strong proponent for film classification over censorship, which the government adopted in 1991. Through its consultancy services, the SFS also helps organisations to manage and promote their film events.

Foreign Cultural Institutions

Singapore's alternative film culture also owes the early years of its development to the work of foreign cultural institutions such as the French Alliance Française (AF) and German Goethe-Institut. In its fledgling years, the SFS would borrow films from foreign embassies and cultural institutions to keep costs down. These foreign institutions, which were keen to promote their country, would also stage film events and festivals as a form of cultural diplomacy and engage Singaporeans through their national cinema.

Some of the earliest and longest-running film programmes were established by the AF and the Goethe-Institut.

When the Singapore branch of the AF opened in 13 April 1949, it marked its launch with a screening of *La Symphonie Pastorale* (1946), which won the Grand Prix award at the 1946 Cannes Film Festival. The film, based on a novella by Andre Gide, is a discomfiting tale of spiritual blindness, forbidden love and morality. Since its first screening, the AF has been tireless in its efforts to promote French cinema, maintaining a close connection with the local film industry since 1960s and putting together film festivals since the 1970s. Today, Dr Shaw Vee Meng, the chairman of Shaw Organisation, sits on the board of the AF as president. The AF continues to organise thematic film series and mini-festivals, as well as regular screenings at its 236-seat in-house theatre through its Ciné Club and Ciné Kids programmes.

Another noteworthy cultural body that has done much to advance film culture in Singapore is the Goethe-Institut, founded in Singapore in 1978. That same year, the institute organised a film festival based

Publicity poster of the 8th German Film Festival held in 2004. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

on German literature, opening with *Faust*, which was inspired by celebrated German writer Goethe's play of the same name. The cultural centre also began free weekly screenings of German classics and films from the German New Cinema movement at the RELC Auditorium in the 1970s.

From 1980 to 1994, the Goethe-Institut screened its films at its 220-seat cinema at the Singapore Shopping Centre; this was a time when there were few screenings of

non-mainstream movies in the city. The Goethe-Institut later held screenings at rented premises in Finlayson Green, and later at its own auditorium at Penang Road, with a line-up that included features, documentaries, video-art, experimental and animated films. In 2014, the Goethe-Institut moved to a conserved shophouse at Neil Road; due to limited space at its premises, film screenings are now organised at multiplexes or cultural organisations such as the National Museum of Singapore.

Special mention should also be made of the British Council, which staged one of the longest-running film showcases, the British Film Festival (from 1984 to 2004), in Singapore. The European Economic Community (today the European Union) also showcased Continental films from Britain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark and Ireland to audiences in Singapore as early as 1977. These film festivals were well-attended.[14]

Today, film festivals are almost de rigueur channels of promotion for foreign embassies. A *Business Times* article in 2003 reported that 10 to 12 film festivals are organised each year with robust ticket sales of up to 95 percent.[15] Some of the foreign festivals that regularly appear on the film festival calendar include the French, Italian, German, Japanese, European Union, Chinese and Korean film festivals. Country-themed festivals on Arab, Australian, Israeli, Latin American, New Zealand, Russian, Scandinavian and Southeast Asian cinema have also been organised by foreign cultural agencies, the SFS or the Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF).

Publicity poster of the 16th Singapore International Film Festival in 2003. The SIFF was launched in 1987. *Collection of the National Library, Singapore.*

The Singapore International Film Festival

The Singapore International Film Festival (SGIFF, formerly SIFF), which just celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2014, is also an important contributor to the alternative film scene since its launch in 1987. Its founder Geoffrey Malone, a Singapore-based Australian architect, saw similarities between the languishing Singapore film industry and its dismal Australian counterpart until the latter's renaissance in the mid-1970s. Having been a part of the Australian New Wave, and a regular attendee of the Sydney Film Festival, he was inspired to start a film festival in Singapore. Modelled after the Mill Valley Film Festival in San Francisco that Malone visited in 1986, the SGIFF was formed to spur local film production and to develop an audience for non-mainstream films.

The festival's first outing had a decidedly Western (and slightly commercial) bent due to the choice of its opening film *The Name of the Rose* (1986), a historical mystery starring Sean Connery and Christian Slater, and closing film *The Mission* (1986), which was headlined by Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. However, by its second instalment, the SGIFF had begun to define and establish its niche in Asian cinema, having featured the works of the Chinese Fifth-Generation directors and a retrospective on the iconic Malay actor P. Ramlee.

In its successive editions, the festival built its reputation as a platform for the promotion of Singapore-made films through the screening of Singapore shorts, features, documentaries and iconic films from the
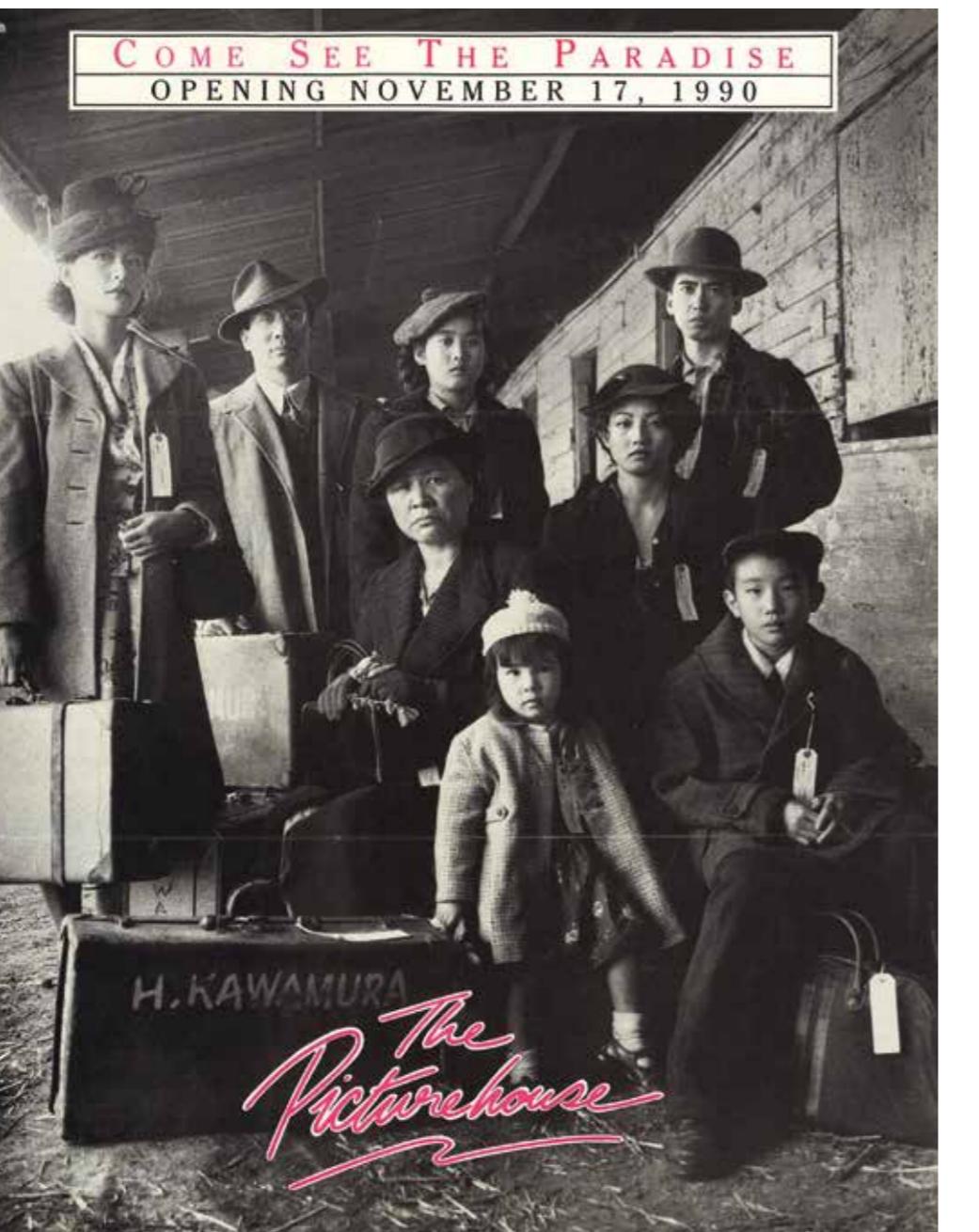
Come See the Paradise was the opening film for Picturehouse when it was launched in 1990. © Come See the Paradise. *Directed by Alan Parker, produced by Robert F. Colesberry & Nellie Nugiel, distributed by 20th Century Fox. United States, 1990. Collection of National Library, Singapore.*

Singapore studio era (1947–1972); as well as a launch pad for aspiring local filmmakers through its introduction of the Silver Screen Awards that recognises the Best Asian Feature and the Best Singapore Short Film. The SGIFF "stood at the cradle of Singapore's film revival…It stimulated the country's short and feature production, discovered its seminal filmmakers, and highlighted its neglected film history."[16]

Art House Cinemas

With the groundwork laid by the SFS since the 1950s, foreign cultural institutions

from the 1970s and the SGIFF in the 1980s, the market appeared ripe for the entry of commercial exhibitors in the 1990s. This decade saw the opening of several art house cinemas in quick succession: Cathay's Picturehouse (November 1990), Overseas Movie's Golden Studio (February 1991), Shaw's Jade Classics (April 1991) and Lido Classics (June 1993).

When Cathay Organisation opened Picturehouse, it had already assessed that audience tastes had changed and filmgoers were becoming more selective – in short Singapore was ready for an upmarket speciality cinema (Picturehouse was known

for its draconian etiquette on dressing and food consumption that was implemented to enhance the art film viewing experience). The theatre screened critically acclaimed and independent films such as *Come See The Paradise* (1990), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) and *Underground* (1995), which straddled between art and entertainment.

However, the cinema found that it could not survive on art films alone as local audiences were not quite ready for more alternative fare. The company began introducing mainstream films, such as *Army Daze* (1996), *The Crow* (1994) and *Striptease* (1996), alongside its less com-

THE FIRST ART HOUSE CINEMA

Though Picturehouse is commonly thought to be the first commercial art house cinema in Singapore, Premier Cinema at Orchard Towers was an even earlier entrant to the scene. When it opened on 29 November 1978, the S$3-million mini-cinema had the smallest hall in town with 477 seats. Its high-backed seats, posh blue interior, and erudite programming soon made it a popular venue with the "arty film crowd".[17]

In its early years, Premier Cinema was known for its release of quality films such as Australian director Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and works by Tsui Hark and Ann Hui, the auteurs of the Hong Kong New Wave Cinema. It was also a favoured venue for film festivals such as the ASEAN, Indian, French and German film festivals. At its peak, one of its films, *The Hurricane* (1979), remained in the box office for three months. However, it was a case of "too arty, too soon" as "most Singaporeans at that time hardly knew what art pictures were".[18] To remain financially viable, the cinema turned to screening B-grade flicks such as *Gold Raiders* (1982) and Hongkong slapsticks like *Aces Go Places II* (1983). Other conditions, such as restrictions on ticket prices, a 35 percent entertainment tax, poor economy and the boom of videos, took its toll on the cinema. Premier Cinema shut its doors in 1983, and was converted into a live-show theatre.

mercial offerings. In 2000, Picturehouse closed after a 10-year run when Cathay Building underwent a revamp. The cinema returned in 2006 with a smaller hall of 82 seats which allowed Cathay to experiment with more esoteric programming without the pressure of filling seats. In the same year, Golden Village introduced the speciality Cinema Europa at its newly opened multiplex at Vivocity.

Today, the outlook for permanent art house venues appears bleak. At present, only Picturehouse and Sinema Old School (Singapore's first and only independent cinema that operated at Mount Sophia from 2007 to 2012) exist as brands as the industry contends with piracy and competes against online streaming, DVD releases and a host of mini film festivals.

Nonetheless, in January 2015 a new independent cinema, The Projector, opened at the old Golden Theatre at Golden Mile Tower. Its management, Pocket Projects, which specialises in adaptive re-use of historic spaces, has partnered FARM, a cross disciplinary design practice, to retain the original retro charm found in the venue's steel frame seats, signage and floor lettering. Luna Films, a film consultancy company, has also been invited on board to curate and bring in alternative films.

Other Initiatives

Art and cultural centres with screening rooms have also contributed to the development of film appreciation in Singapore through the film series, festivals, talks, workshops, symposiums and filmmaking projects they organise. Some of the more well known programmes include Moving Images by The Substation (1997), Screening Room by the Arts House (2004) and Cinematheque by the National Museum of Singapore (2006). Broadly, The Substation's curatorial focus is on video art, experimental films, Singapore shorts, documentaries and regional works; the Screening Room showcases films from Singapore and Asia as well as cult favourites; while the National Museum's emphasis is on Singapore shorts and retrospectives, and World Cinema.

To support the commercial and not-for-profit exhibition of alternative films, small independent film distributors such as Festive Films (2002), Lighthouse Pictures (2003) and Objectifs Film (2006) have emerged in recent years, as well as indie film websites such as Sinema and SINDie to challenge and whet the appetites of avid cinephiles in Singapore. ◆

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A MOVING JOURNEY

Film, Archiving and Curatorship

Karen Chan is Executive Director of the Asian Film Archive (AFA). Besides overseeing the growth, preservation and curation of the AFA's collection, she teaches film literacy and preservation courses to educators, students and filmmakers. Karen also serves on the Executive Council of the South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association.

As the Asian Film Archive celebrates its 10th anniversary, **Karen Chan** takes a look back at the genesis of the organisation, the work it does and its plans for the future.

In 2005, I was introduced to a soft-spoken but tenacious young man who had single-handedly established the Asian Film Archive (AFA) in Singapore. What drew me to Tan Bee Thiam's project was his vision: to set up a Pan-Asian institution that aspired to provide a repository for all Asian films – many of which had yet to be archived in their own countries. Partly curious as to how this not-for-profit, independent organisation would survive, and partly enthused by the prospect of contributing towards the maintenance, preservation, restoration and curation of archival films, I set aside my practical and less than adventurous nature and took the plunge – joining the AFA as an archivist in 2006, assuming the role of acting director in 2010 and subsequently taking over the reins as executive director in 2014. As the AFA celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, I take a look back on a journey that has been both challenging and exhilarating by turns.

From a professional viewpoint, getting the fledgling AFA organised and functioning took a staggering amount of work. Today, Southeast Asian countries have their own national archives while a few host an audio-visual archive department as a unit within the larger entity, such as in the case of the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia). However, organisational film archiving in Southeast Asia was in its infancy as recently as 10 years ago when only Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand had their own dedicated film archives. This was the state of the film archiving landscape in the region when the AFA first began. Over the years, Cambodia and the Philippines have established their own film archives.

Film Archives in Southeast Asia

The first film archive to be set up in Southeast Asia was the Sinematek Indonesia (Indonesian Cinematheque), established in 1975 under the late Misbach Yusa Biran (a 1997 South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association Lifetime Achievement Awardee and 2010 Fellow recipient). But in spite of his pioneering archiving work, by 2010, the Sinematek was, in Misbach's words, "at its sunset".[1]

On the other side of the Southeast Asian divide, the Vietnam Film Institute (VFI), one of the region's older film archives formed in 1979, was tasked to archive Vietnam's cinematic and audiovisual heritage as well as function as its distribution and research arm. The VFI has been much more successful in its endeavours and through its links with INA (Institut National de L'audiovisuel, France), is planning to start a digitised library in Hanoi.[2]

The Film Archive (Public Organisation) Thailand began as the Thai Film Archives in 1984 under Dome Sukavong. For years it remained a neglected unit within the Department of Fine Arts before becoming a public organisation in 2009. The archive has survived to celebrate its 30th anniversary in a new building with better facilities.[3]

Laos' film industry was sidelined by its long period of civil war. The National Film Archive and Video Center (Lao Cinema Department), established in 1991, was charged with preserving the country's audio-visual heritage. With UNESCO's assistance, the department has successfully developed a database of the country's film archives.[4]

Cambodia came into the archiving scene in 2006 with the opening of the Bophana Center, founded by the acclaimed Cambodian film director, Rithy Panh. Offering free access to its collection of film, television, photography and sound archives, researchers and local film enthusiasts finally had access to a resource for Cambodian audiovisual materials.[5] Unfortunately, the archive's limited annual budget makes it a constant challenge for the staff to expand its services.

The archiving situation in the Philippines is a complex one given that the film preservation function is encapsulated within the archiving of audiovisual materials. Instead of a centralised body overseeing the archival of films, the work was split between three government institutions – the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP), the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the University of the Philippines Film Institute. It was only in 2011 that the FDCP formed a National Film Archive of the Philippines.[6] Critics have long disparaged the government's inaction in the area of film archiving, likening it to "a blind man in the creative industry".[7] Digna H. Santiago, a film marketing professor from the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde in Manila noted that the government "does not have the foresight of preserving films because they view the industry as one that only provides temporary entertainment."[8]

Given the challenging film archiving scenarios in these various countries, it was clear that an Asia-wide organisation such as the AFA would be relevant and necessary. Within the first year of the AFA's Reel Emergency Project's open call for the deposit of films for preservation, hundreds of films and related materials such as photographs and publicity kits from Singapore and countries from all over Asia were submitted.

AFA's Ethos and Practices

When the AFA first started, its two-man team grappled with the ethos and practices that would drive the archive, besides spending countless hours building up the collection. Janna Jones' observations about a moving image archive succinctly captures the complexity of the organisational practices involved in film archiving: there is a certain "dialectic of creation and destruction, control and chaos... logic and ingenuity, order and disruption" that define the "discovery, interpretation, re-presentation, and accessing"[9] of the visual experience of cinema, she says.

An archive is a space managed by rational and disciplined logic but yet decisions made in those early years were based on both intuition and logic, by marrying the
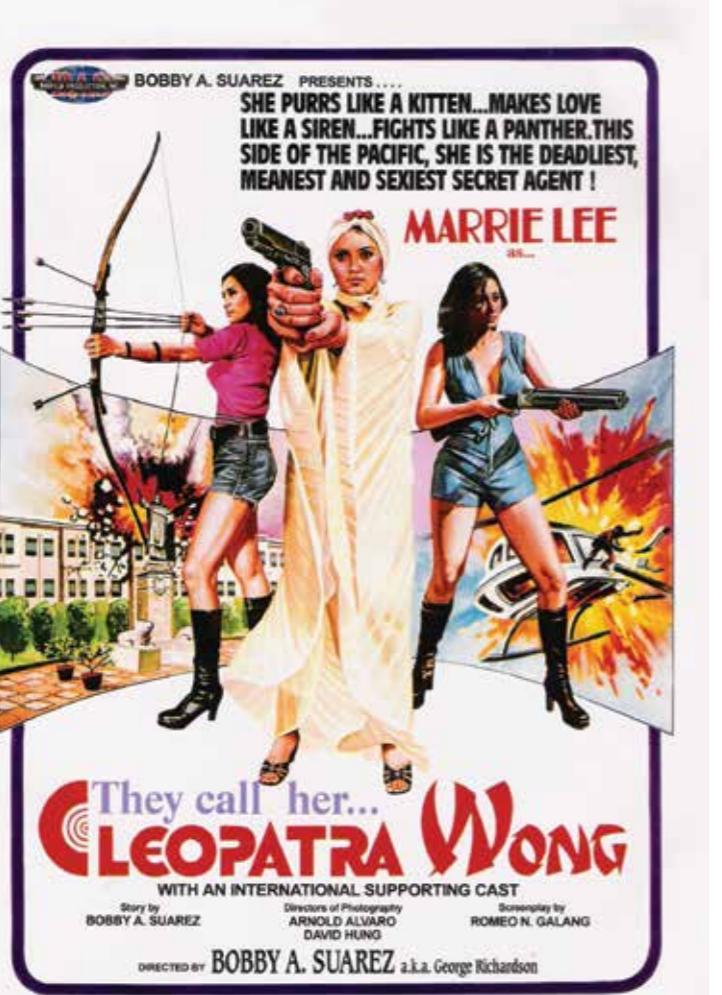
They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong was released in 1978, and starred Marrie Lee as an Interpol agent. This poster is part of the AFA's holdings. © *Cleopatra Wong International Pte Ltd.*

ABOUT THE AFA

The Asian Film Archive (AFA) is a charity that preserves Asia's rich film heritage in a permanent collection focusing on culturally important works by independent Asian filmmakers. It promotes a wider critical appreciation of Asia's cinematic works through organised community programmes, including screenings and talks.

AFA's holdings include films of award-winning Filipino filmmakers such as Lino Brocka, Mike de Leon, Lav Diaz, and Malaysian filmmakers Amir Muhammad, U-Wei Haji Saari and Tan Chui Mui, among others. The Archive is also home to a collection of Cathay-Keris Malay Classics from the 1950s to 1970s that are part of the UNESCO Memory of The World Asia-Pacific Register, a list of endangered library and archive holdings.

The AFA's collection is available for public reference at the library@

10th anniversary logo of the Asian Film Archive

esplanade and through the AFA Channel on viddsee.com, an online portal that showcases the best of short films from Southeast Asia.

The AFA became a subsidiary of the National Library Board in January 2014.

personal with the professional. The AFA's survival depended on how it would manage the balancing act of creating a sustainable archive that could serve its stakeholders effectively while at the same time bringing together accessible and meaningful programmes for its users.

Developing a set of acquisition, selection and preservation policies was imperative. These policies were drafted using reference points from the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) *Code of Ethics*; Ray Edmondson's *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* (Paris, UNESCO, 2004); and The UNESCO Recommendation on the Preservation of Moving Images (1985). It would be beyond the scope of this article to delve into a discussion on the principles and philosophies of film archiving. However, I will articulate some of the main points underlying the AFA's preservation policies.

While its name dictates Asia as its collection ambit, the AFA has focused its preservation efforts in the last nine years on the geographical region of Southeast Asia. As mentioned earlier, until recently, Southeast Asia had very few dedicated film archives with the means and the budgets to archive the numerous films produced in the region. Nevertheless, concentrating on Southeast Asia did not limit the films that the AFA acquired for its collection – it currently archives titles from wider Asia, such as China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India and Iran.

Although archives are generally associated with the antiquated, the AFA's collection is relatively young by archival standards, with 70 percent of its films dating back to an average of 25 years. The main reason is because the AFA makes a conscious effort to acquire the works of living filmmakers. The selection criteria are determined by a list of priorities, taking into account the condition of the films' formats and the "Asian-ness" and significance of the films on the cultural landscapes of both its country of origin and internationally. In addition, films that are independently produced and are not preserved in the home country of the filmmaker or by any other archive, receive particular attention. These guidelines are detailed on the AFA's website and the mechanics of how films can be submitted for assessment and preservation are elaborated in the website's Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section.[10]

With the advent of the digital age, archivists are scrambling to care for their analogue systems, digitising and migrating analogue materials while keeping up with technological advances in order to preserve new digital material. Apart from the practical concerns of know-how and time, there is the very real issue of funding to support on-going digital preservation. The estimated cost (in

2007) of preserving film archival master material per title annually was US$1,059 while the digital preservation of the same material was estimated at US$12,514.[11] Factor in inflation and the growing numbers of digital films produced every year, and the figure becomes mind-boggling.

The exponentially burgeoning budgets required for digital preservation bring to fore several important issues – acquisition, access and advocacy. Archives can no longer make do with an ad hoc policy to "acquire everything, just in case". The AFA has in place a carefully articulated selection policy that is tied to access issues. An archivist has to look backwards and forwards in time, acquiring filmic material and assessing if someone in the future may find the material significant and useful.[12] The AFA will likely not acquire a film if the filmmaker stipulates that it is not meant for public access, unless the reasons for the restricted access are acceptable – for example, a film cannot be released until after its film festival premiere or a film cannot be viewed due to the deteriorating condition of the sole surviving film copy until an access copy has been made.

As Sam Kula, former director of the National Film, Television and Sound division of the National Archives of Canada, has stated so articulately, "In archives, the only thing that really matters is the quality of the collections; all the rest is housekeeping."[13]

The Importance of Archiving

To raise the funds needed to run a film archive, modern archivists must advocate for their cause while ensuring that potential donors understand why the archive's work is important, and its impact on heritage and artistic preservation. Regardless of the worthiness of the film archive's intentions, the public will not support preservation without seeing its results. Archivists need to make their work visible in order to raise the public's awareness of what exactly archives do. Only then can archives elicit continued support and generate new revenues.[14] Over the years, the AFA has done its best to connect with the public and its stakeholders by promoting and showcasing its programmes in order to garner support and goodwill. This was particularly important during those early years when the AFA was an independent not-for-profit organisation and depended solely on public funding.

Aside from the variety of talks, workshops and film screenings for educators, students, the film community and the general public, the AFA has organised different events to create awareness on film preservation. The Save Our Film campaign in 2010 was a collaboration with final-year students from

the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and was aimed at raising awareness among youths aged 15 to 35 on Singapore's rich local film heritage and the importance of keeping it alive for future generations. The campaign featured a series of nationwide guerrilla-style publicity efforts such as mock DVDs and posters at supporting stores and cinemas that promoted early Singapore titles with a twist; video projections on walls and ceilings at public spaces; and a roving showcase featuring recordings from local film community personalities.[15] Another more recent effort in 2014 to raise the profile of AFA's preservation efforts was its successful inscription of 91 Cathay-Keris Malay Classics into the UNESCO Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Register.[16]

Nonetheless, advocating film preservation is an uphill task, especially when there are so many equally worthy public causes competing for funds. In an effort to take on a more proactive curatorial role and shed the passivity that archives are usually associated with, film archives all over the world are using technology to restore older titles in their collection and make these films more accessible to the public.[17] Through such restoration projects, the archive is able to more effectively advocate for its work through the films it chooses to restore and the strategic activities it can organise in

connection with the restored films. However, film restoration is a highly expensive investment; the restoration of a single film could cost upwards of S$100,000, depending on its condition. Although the AFA has embarked on the restoration of a number of important films and has accompanying programmes lined up, its other functions, specifically, preservation and access, remain a priority. After all, without preservation, there would be no films to restore: the restoration process is only a means to achieve the larger and overarching goal of film preservation.

Part of AFA's advocacy efforts is to create greater awareness of its work in the region, and what better way to do that than by spreading the word through the regional archiving community. A year after the AFA's formation, it applied for membership of the South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association (SEAPAVAA). This is an association of organisations and individuals involved in the development of audiovisual archiving in Southeast Asia, Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), and the Pacific Islands (Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia). Currently over 38 countries are members of SEAPAVAA.

Shortly after, in 2007, the AFA became the first Singapore-based organisation to become an affiliate of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). Being a member of these associations has helped AFA to develop relationships between

THE 19TH SEAPAVAA CONFERENCE

Hosted by the AFA and supported by the National Library Board, Singapore, the 19th South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association (SEAPAVAA) Conference and General Assembly will take place from 22 to 28 April 2015. The week-long event at the National Library Building will feature a two-day symposium with concurrent sessions, institutional visits, Restoration Asia II (an event focusing on the restoration of films in Asia or about Asia), workshops, and an excursion. A total of 48 papers will be presented during the

conference on topics such as archival advocacy, archival repatriation, professional development, repurposing of archives, technical, organisational and professional sustainability, and archives at risk. For more information, visit www.seapavaaconference.com. The theme for the 2015 SEAPAVAA conference is *Advocate. Connect. Engage*. This theme resonates closely with the thrust of AFA's programmes and the three objectives contained in its mission statement – "To Save, Explore, and Share the Art of Asian Cinema".

archivists and the wider film communities, allowing for an exchange of information, experiences and networking opportunities. Annual conferences have provided further avenues for the AFA to share its work as well as learn from the many professionals who attend these conferences.

The AFA has come a long way from when it started 10 years ago by the visionary Tan Bee Thiam. Having built a reputation and gained traction with the regional film community, AFA's mission statement – "To Save, Explore, and Share the Art of Asian Cinema" – will continue to guide its future work and direction. The editors of *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums and the Digital Marketplace* succinctly define film curatorship as "the art of interpreting the aesthetics, history, and technology of cinema through the selective collection, preservation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations."[18] On this occasion of the AFA's 10th anniversary, this quote eloquently encapsulates what the words "Save, Explore and Share" in AFA's mission statement hopes to achieve. ♦

DIGITAL FILM RESTORATION

Digital film restoration is a highly specialised and laborious process. It involves the complex use of technological software and equipment that are designed to ingest huge amounts of data. The simplified workflow diagram below gives an idea of the three main parts of digital film restoration – repair and cleaning; restoration and preservation; and access output.

Film repair and cleaning

Restoration and preservation

Access output
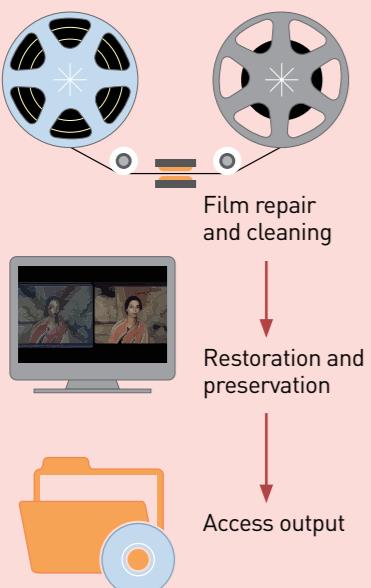
THE GENESIS OF THE ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

The Asian Film Archive (AFA) was the brainchild of Tan Bee Thiam, its founder and former executive director. After graduating from the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2004, Tan embarked on a two-month backpacking trip that took him to New Delhi, India. Unbeknownst to him at the time, this visit would sow the seeds for the beginnings of the first Singapore-based film archive. Tan had always been a film enthusiast; as a student he served as the president of the NUS film society, nuSTUDIOS, and was himself an emerging filmmaker. In New Delhi, Tan attended the Osian's-Cinefan: 6th Festival of Asian Cinema, where he was exposed to key filmmakers from around Asia.

These figures, including members from NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema), like Singapore's Phillip Cheah and India's Aruna Vasudev, would later inspire and influence his thoughts. NETPAC's mission is to promote lesser known Asian films. "The organisation impressed me," recalls Tan. "A lot of media attention is given to the glamour of the Cannes, Venice and Berlin film festivals. But there are very hardworking Asian filmmakers who create works for their own reading. I felt that their work, at least those I'd seen, were important and groundbreaking."

Tan had the good fortune of acting as translator for the post-screening Q&A sessions of the acclaimed Taiwan-based filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang. In their conversations, Tsai provoked Tan into thinking about archiving and its importance. "[Tsai] had problems with distribution, problems with keeping track of his own film prints," recounts Tan. "Even for a very established filmmaker like Tsai Ming Liang, his works were rarely seen outside of film festivals." This led to conversations with other Asian filmmakers such as award-winning Malaysian director U-Wei Haji Saari, who revealed that he stored the film prints of his acclaimed films himself, acknowledging that in a tropical environment, they would run the risk of being damaged.

Tan quickly recognised the challenges these Asian independent filmmakers faced. Not only did they have trouble raising money to produce their films, these works did not always receive the traction they deserved, denying audiences the opportunity to view them. Many films might

not even survive the passage of time; in 2004, few Asian countries had their own national film archive, and those that existed did not function effectively. Without proper preservation facilities, it was clear to Tan that significant elements of Asian heritage and culture would be lost forever.

The Basis
In the course of his research, Tan drew inspiration from the great work of the British Film Institute (BFI), Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive and Asian film archives in Taiwan, Thailand and Hong Kong. International and regional film institutions such as the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) and the South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association (SEAPAVAA) offered further insight into the different models he could pursue.

Upon his return from India, Tan was pleasantly surprised to discover that there had already been suggestions to establish a Singapore film archive. He spent the next few months networking, meeting filmmakers and heads of institutions as well as film researchers, laying the foundations and framework the archive would be built upon.

Tan envisioned that the archive would be situated in the context of a university, to be enjoyed not just for entertainment but as a form of art and for serious study, providing resources for research and academia. He also wanted to situate Singapore cinema in the wider context of Asian cinema – a film archive that would be Asian in its scope and focus.

Tan turned to his alma mater, NUS, and approached Chew Kheng Chuan, founding director of NUS' Development Office and chairman of The Substation (Singapore), who supported Tan's vision. He offered Tan not only his wealth of experience, but also office space within the NUS Development Office – the AFA's first home.

The Birth
Tan approached his NUS schoolmate, filmmaker Kirsten Tan, with whom he had made films with when they were in nuSTUDIOS. Kirsten gave Tan her full support and joined him as a co-founder. He also approached Kenneth Paul Tan, a NUS political science professor at the time, and Kenneth Chan, an assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) humanities school. Jacqueline Tan,

a lecturer for the Film, Sound & Video (FSV) course at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, and *Straits Times* journalist and film critic Ong Sor Fern rounded out the team, forming the first governing board of the AFA.

The team was met with scepticism in their search for archival space and funding. People were hesitant to collaborate with the AFA as it was unproven in an endeavour that other established institutions had attempted but failed. This changed when Tan emailed a Christmas greeting to NAS' then director, Pitt Kuan Wah, in December 2004. This email proved to be a game changer.

Pitt and NAS' then deputy director of the Audiovisual Archives Unit, Irene Lim, were extremely supportive of the idea of the AFA. It was a project that was aligned with NAS' own heritage preservation mission. Things quickly fell into place: a referendum of understanding was drafted and NAS became an archiving partner. This partnership was essential because AFA finally had access to proper archival storage facilities and could function as a film archive.

In January 2005, the AFA decided to establish itself as an independent non-profit public company with limited guarantee. The AFA made a call for contributions and more than 200 film titles were collected within the first half of 2005. The AFA steadily garnered support from local and regional filmmakers and received positive press coverage. In March 2005, a working committee was formed to prepare for an Asian film symposium as well as to produce Singapore's first DVD anthology of Singaporean short films – the

Tan Bee Thiam (right) presenting a token of appreciation to former president S.R. Nathan (left) in 2010. Courtesy of the AFA.

Asian Film Archive Collection: Singapore Shorts Vol. 1.

The AFA has since grown from strength to strength, expanding its collection, engaging and educating the public and preserving Asia's film heritage for future generations.

Thong Kay Wee is the Outreach Officer of the Asian Film Archive (AFA). One part publicist and one part curator, he is responsible for devising strategies to propagate the archive's mission and film collection. In his free time, he considers himself an independent moving image artist.

Notes

1   Quote from South East Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association citation of Misbach Yusa Biran as one of its founding fellows on its website, News Archive 2010, Inaugural Fellows Circle; http://www.seapavaa.com/

2   This is the vendor's template of VFI's digitised library software platform 2014; http://www.opsomai.com/en/archives-references/131-vietnam.html

3   'The reels keep turning', *Bangkok Post*, 2014, http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/430558/.

4   Segay, Jeremy, "Current Audiovisual And Cinema Situation in Laos", 2007, http://film.culture360.asef.org/magazine/current-audiovisual-and-cinema-situation-in-laos/.

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6   Nocon C., Ramon, "Finally, a national film archive", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2011, http://entertainment.inquirer.net/18669/finally-a-national-film-archive.

7   Del Mundo C., *National Audio-visual Archive*, p.4, 2009, Manila, The Philippines.

8   Santiago, D. H., interviewed for *Saving Face: Issues in Film Preservation and Archiving*, Santiago, M., 2010.

9   Jones, Janna, *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film*, pg.9, Florida, University Press of Florida, 2012.

10 AFA's collection guidelines and FAQ section can be found on the AFA website http://www.asianfilmarchive.org.

11 Jones, p.126

12 Davis, Randall, *Digital Dilemma: Strategic Issues in Archiving and Accessing Digital Motion Picture Materials*, p.2, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007.

13 Jones, p.126.

14 Kula, Sam, *Appraising moving images: assessing the archival and monetary value of film and video records*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2003.

15 Details on the campaign can be seen on the campaign website http://www.asianfilmarchive.org/5th/about.htm

16 Publicity coverage in *The Straits Times* on the UNESCO inscription: http://www.stcommunities.sg/entertainment/movies/st-review/cache-singapore-malay-films-recognised-unesco-part-regions-heritage. Information about the UNESCO Memory of the World programme can be found at http://www.unesco.mowcap.org/index.htm.

17 Francis, David, *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Marketplace*, p.170, Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Fracis, Alexander Horwath, Michael Loebenstein (eds.), SYNEMA Publikationen and Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, Italy, Vienna, Austria, 2008.

18 *Ibid.*, p.231.

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SEARCHING FOR SINGAPORE IN OLD MAPS AND SEA CHARTS

Kwa Chong Guan dissects the history of maps, and tells us how Singapore was perceived and located in early modern European maps of the region.

Kwa Chong Guan is a member of the National Library Board and chairman of its National Archives Advisory Committee. He is also a Senior Fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University.

The study of maps has traditionally been the purview of geographers. Maps are a documentation of the landscapes that geographers study, and as such, have not attracted the attention of historians whose primary concern is the study of events. But maps document the spatial context within which the events that historians study occur. This essay examines how early modern European maps and sea charts of Asia are significant for what they show of Singapore's historical significance and strategic location two centuries before Stamford Raffles claimed it.

The National Library's acquisition in 2012 of Dr David E. Parry's collection of early modern maps of Insulae Indiae Orientalis (or, the East Indian Islands) is a major step forward in the search for Singapore's historical roots in old maps and sea charts. Parry is a soil scientist and remote sensing expert who used a variety of modern and not-so-modern topographic and thematic maps of the region in the course of his work. Over the course of 25 years while working in Indonesia, he amassed an outstanding collection of historic maps of island Southeast Asia[1] that contains much information on issues of Singapore's historical significance and its strategic location.

More than a Reflection of Landscapes

We accept that the maps in Parry's collection are an accurate reflection of Southeast Asia's landscape in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, just as we accept that the maps we download from Google today are accurate and reliable reflections of what we see around us, helping us to get from point A to point B in the quickest possible time. If we do not reach our destination by following the signs and symbols we read on the map, we assume we missed a landmark – a road junction we should have turned at, but did not; or a temple we saw, but could not find on the map – and we backtrack to look again around us for the signs and symbols marked on the map to get to our destination. In this sense, the map is not a reflection of the reality we see around us, but the reality into which we fit what we see around us.

Topographic maps, or street directories, as the historian of cartography J.B. Harley[2] argues, "persuades" us to encounter what we should be seeing and searching for in the landscape around us. Maps, Harley says, are "inherently rhetorical images." They persuade us to see our landscape in a particular context and perspective. Harley also argues that maps, "are never neutral or value-free or even completely scientific … They are part of a persuasive discourse, and they intend to convince."

We believe in maps because they help us to locate ourselves in unfamiliar places, and because we think what maps tell us is both convincing and useful. But will there come a time when we question the accuracy and the adequacy of the map? Do we deem the map unreliable when we cannot match the hills we see in front of us on a trek with what is marked on the map? Or, when the map has symbols and signs of too many landmarks and features that confuse us, and we cannot match what we see around us with what is marked on the map? Do we reject those maps and look for another map that

projects an image we find more convincing about the landscape around us?

What do we make of a 16th-century Portuguese sea chart of the Straits of Melaka and Singapore that does not mark a Cingaporla, Cingatola or Cinghapola, (the old Portuguese transcriptions for Singapura) where we expect to see it? Is the chart therefore inaccurate and to be disregarded? Or, should we not ask why the Portuguese cartographer misrepresented the location of Cingaporla? Is Singapore the "Sabana Emporium" located on the southern edge of the Golden Khersonese or Golden Peninsula in the 16th-century rendition of a world map based on the work of the 2nd-century Greek astronomer Claudius Ptolemy? If so, then we should intensively study Ptolemy's map for what else it can tell us about this earliest possible mention of a settlement on this island.

In reality, the early Portuguese, and all other European cartographers, were in a sense filling in the blank spaces of their maps with toponyms, geographical details and historical data of the lands they were

exploring. In choosing what to mark on the maps, they were in fact documenting a vision of the East as lands of great wealth, the locus of King Soloman's Ophir with its abundance of gold, silver and other gems which Ptolemy's poetic reference to the Golden Khersonese confirmed. Asianus in Latin (or Asianos in Greek) was believed to be the source of things exotic: silks and spices, aromatic herbs, intoxicating drugs, places of golden opportunities. Was this continent of Asianus really located at the furthest edge of a flat world as depicted in medieval maps of the Christian world, or was the world a sphere as Ptolemy had calculated?

This essay argues that these early modern Portuguese, Dutch and English maps and charts of the landscape around our island
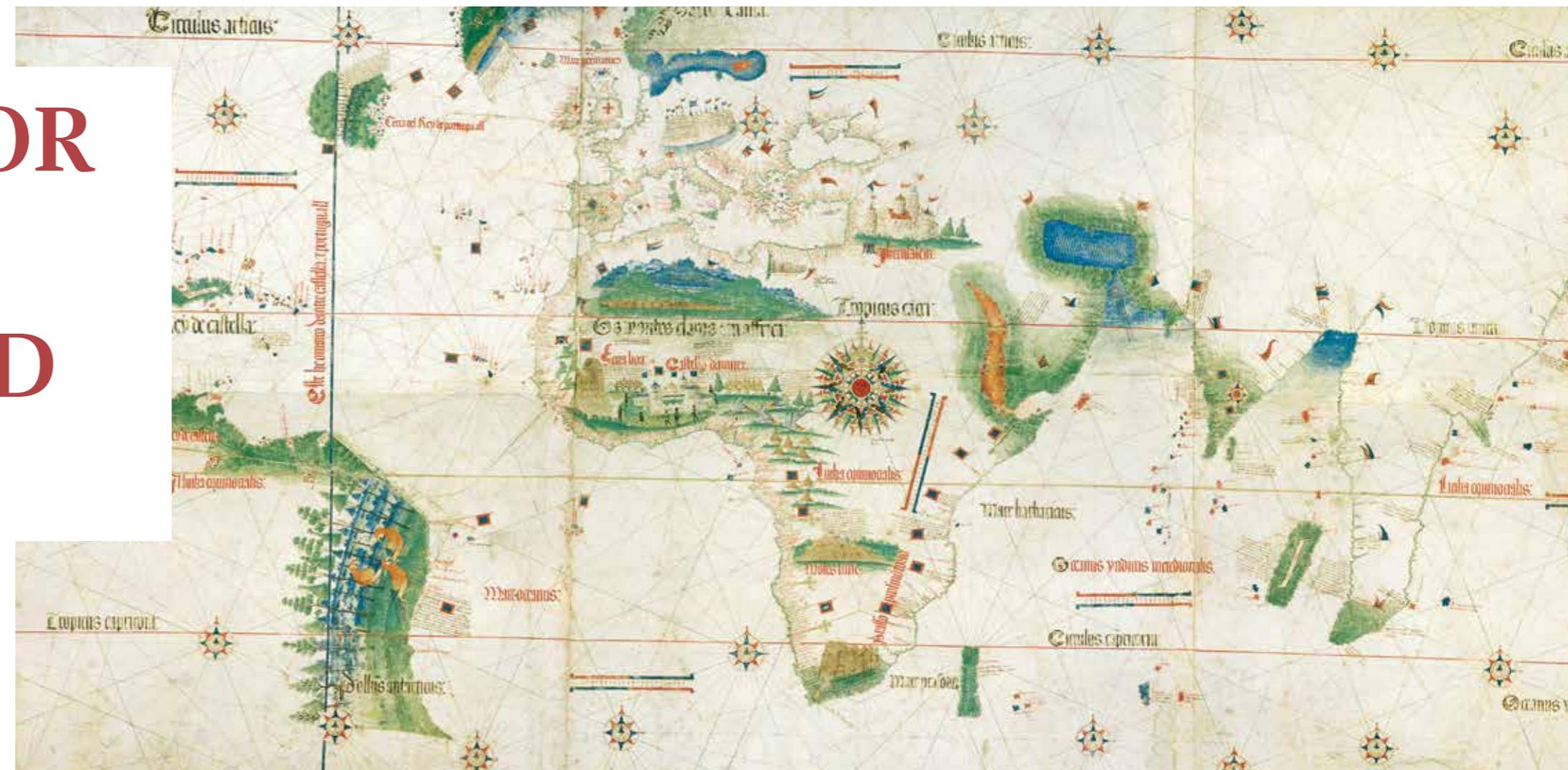
are critical evidence of Singapore's historical roots not because they are an accurate (or inaccurate) reflection of the landforms these Portuguese sailors encountered as they sailed through the Straits of Melaka and Singapore, but more importantly, because they were statements about Singapore's location in a world of rich and exotic things these sailors *believed* they were sailing around.

These maps were rhetorical devices the Portuguese sailors must have found reassuring as they sailed into the hitherto uncharted waters of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. The maps and charts were comforting because they assured the Portuguese sailors that they would not sail off a flat world into nothingness, as they were taught in Christian theology. These early modern maps were not a representation of our 16th-17th century world, but a documentation of a Renaissance Europe constructing a new world of Asianus and itself. They depict a Europe coming to terms with itself as no longer the centre of the world, as depicted in their theological maps of the world, but having to rethink its place in relation to the new and vast continent of Asianus.[3]

The Legacy of Claudius Ptolemy

The view of the world as a sphere and not the flat disc of medieval European cartography is very much the legacy of Ptolemy, who developed in his work *Geographike Huphegesis* – or simply *Geography* as it is more commonly referred to – a grid system of describing and mapping the world that has become the basis of cartography today. Ptolemy borrowed from the work of earlier Greek geographers, namely Strabo, Eratosthenes, and Hipparchus of Nicaea. These early Greek geographers assumed that geography was more a science derived from philosophy and mathematics than a tradition passed on by sailors and navigators. These Greek philosophers were more interested in fundamental questions of the nature and shape of the earth – was it a flat disc or a sphere? – than documenting landforms of foreign lands as described by sailors and explorers.

As far as we know, it was Plato, in his work *Phaedo,* who argued that the earth must be spherical because the sphere is the most perfect mathematical form. Later Greek philosophers such as Aristotle refined the mathematics for a spherical earth. But it was Eratosthenes, perhaps the greatest of the ancient Greek geographers, who was the first to calculate the circumference of the earth based on the difference in the length of the shadows cast by the sun at noon in Alexandria and at Syene (modern Aswan). He also attempted to develop a grid for his maps which he based – in deference to the

UNDECIMA ASIAE TABULA

demands of sailors – on prominent landmarks such as Alexandria and the Pillars of Hercules. It was an irregular network of grids which his successor, the astronomer Hipparchus, radically improved upon.

Instead of pegging his grid to geographical and historical landmarks, Hipparchus worked out a grid pegged to the position of the stars. It was Hipparchus who divided the world into 360 latitudinal parts and 180 parallel longitudinal parts. Then came Ptolemy, whose skill and greatness lay in his ability to synthesise and improve upon the work of his predecessors.

Ptolemy may have been forgotten in medieval Europe, but not in the Islamic empires that emerged after the 7th century. A massive translation programme of much of the corpus of Greek philosophy and science was undertaken under the Abbasid caliphs al-Manṣūr (reigned 754-78), Hārūn al-Rashīd (reigned 786-808) and al-Maʾmūn (reigned 813-33) which fundamentally shaped the nascent Islamic civilisation, and was the conduit

through which Ptolemy and much of Greek philosophy and science was transmitted back to late medieval and Renaissance Europe.

Refugees fleeing the Turkish advance on Constantinople brought to Italy a number of Byzantine manuscripts, including Ptolemy's *Geography.* The 1405 Latin translation of this seminal work caused a sensation. It inspired Iberian sailors and navigators to sail further afield in their search for alternative sea routes to Southeast Asia, the source of spices for which demand was growing exponentially in Europe. These explorers started revising and expanding the classical navigation guides, or *periplus,* to the coasts they were sailing along. From the 14th century onwards, Iberian and Italian navigators started producing a series of sea charts (or *portolanos)* to accompany the textual navigational guides they had been using previously.

The secret Portuguese world chart – a copy of which the Italian agent Alberto Cantino smuggled out of Lisbon in 1502 and now bears his name as the Cantino Chart – comprehen

sively summarises Portuguese knowledge of the seas at the beginning of the 16th century. On the Cantino Chart, the African coast is as we would recognise it today, with Portuguese flags planted at their respective landfalls. The Indian coast, which the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama reached in 1498, is also recognisable on this chart. But beyond the Indian Ocean is still a blank and the mapping of Insulae Indiae Orientalis reflects Ptolemy's work as rewritten by 10th and 11th century Byzantine clerics who incorporated Byzantine and earlier Arabic data into the text and compiling maps they attributed to Ptolemy.

Ptolemy's maps and system of anticipating what lay over the horizon of the ocean provided more assurance and inspiration than the flat world map as depicted in the flawed *Topographia Christiana (Christian Topography)* of the 6th century. More importantly, the Iberian navigators of the 15th century found Ptolemy's maps and system of longitude and latitude coordinates, as copied and modified by various Byzantine clerics and earlier Arab

geographers, a far more credible and reliable model of the world than the medieval world maps they had inherited. It enabled them to accurately map the locations of places they were sailing to as compared to the flat maps of the world they were familiar with. Ptolemy's influence is clear among the leading European cartographers of the 16th century.

The Ptolemaic vision of Indiae Orientalis was not corrected until around 1513 with the publication of *Livro de Francisco Rodrigues (The Book of Francisco Rodrigues)* by the self-styled "Pilot-Major of the Armada that discovered Banda and the Moluccas". This is one of the earliest navigational guides with 26 maps and charts on sailing from Europe to East Africa and onwards to Melaka and then the Moluccas (Maluku) and north China. Other rutters and charts provided new data to revise Ptolemy's map.

The German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller (1470-1518) led the revision and updating of the Ptolemaic model to incorporate new information that 15th-century voyagers were bringing back. His 1507 *Universalis Cosmographia* map of the world has today attained World Heritage status as the first map to identify America as a separate land mass. In addition to the obligatory 27 Ptolemaic maps, Waldseemüller also published another 20 "modern maps" that were revised in various editions.

Another German cartographer, Sebastian Münster (1488-1552) produced a new edition of Ptolemy's *Geography* in 1540 with 12 new maps and a major text, and published *Cosmographia* four years later. The work went through some 56 editions in six languages in the following century. Münster's world map continued to follow Ptolemy's principle, in which all the continents were linked up and enclosed the Indian Ocean, even as accumulating knowledge showed otherwise. It was only in the 17th century that this Ptolemaic image of Asia was finally abandoned.

Recovering Ptolemy's Legacy in SE Asia

It was the Greco-Latin texts, in particular those by Ptolemy, that the pioneering generation of historians studied to make sense of the historical landscape of Southeast Asia they were reconstructing. George Coedès, who became the doyen of early Southeast Asian history, started his career by publishing an edition of the Greek and Latin texts on Southeast Asia in 1910. Louis Renou's 1925 edition of Book VII of Ptolemy's *Geography* is

still today one of the better guides to a difficult text.[4] The lawyer and barrister, Dato Sir Roland Braddell, pioneered the study of the Ptolemaic references to Malaya in the 1930s.[5]

A new era in the study of the historical geography of Malaya started with the establishment of a Department of Geography at the University of Malaya and the recruitment of Paul Wheatley in 1952. Wheatley focused on the historical geography of Malaya and studied classical Chinese to access the Chinese texts on early Southeast Asia. His 1958 University of London doctoral thesis on *The Golden Khersonese: Studies in the Historical Geography of the Malay Peninsula before A.D. 1500,* published in 1961, remains today a benchmark reference text. In successive chapters he collated and translated the classical Chinese, Greek, Latin, Indian and Arab textual references to the historical geography of Malaya.

Wheatley also reached out to Prof Hsu Yun-ts'iao, a driving force in the establishment of a tradition of Chinese scholarship on Singapore and the Nanyang at the old Nanyang University and the older South Seas Society. Hsu spent much of his academic career searching the Chinese texts for references to early Singapore. Gerald R. Tibbetts, who was researching Arab trade in early Southeast Asia at the University of Khartoum, was asked to collate Arab material relating to the Malay Peninsula, a summary of which was published in the *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography.* Tibbetts continued to collate the Arab texts containing material on Southeast Asia, part of which has been published.[6]

All these studies of Singapore's early historical geography and that of the Malay Peninsula stopped with the arrival of the Portuguese at Melaka. The development of Portuguese and Dutch cartography of Southeast Asian waters within an evolving Ptolemaic model of the world has not attracted the attention it deserves. The exception is the translated edition by J.V.G Mills, a Puisne Judge of the Straits Settlement, of the *Declaracam de Malaca e India Meridional com o Cathay* by the Eurasian explorer and mathematician Manuel Godinho d'Erédia.[7] Mills was also commissioned in 1934 "to make a collection of early maps and charts relating to the Malay Peninsula" and "spent many months during the summer of that year examining available material in the libraries of the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, the School of Oriental Studies and the Royal Asiatic Society." [8] This collection of 208 maps starts with copies of maps attributed to Ptolemy to the 1502 Cantino Chart and ends with 1879 maps of the peninsula are now deposited in the Lee Kong Chian Library at the National Library, Singapore.

Distinguishing the Old Straits from the New Straits

It fell to the polymath scholar of Malaysiana, Carl Alexander Gibson-Hill, to detect inconsistencies and discrepancies in d'Erédia's demarcation of the four waterways for sailing past Singapore – the Johor Straits, the Keppel Harbour passage, the Sister's Fairway (south of present-day Sentosa Island) and the Main Straits – and that of later sea charts. The 18th-century sea charts marked the waterway between Johor and Singapore as the "Old Straits," but for the Portuguese mariners, the "Old Straits" was not the Johor Straits that they tried to avoid as the sultans of Johor controlled the estuary of the Johor River.

Through their Malay pilots, the Portuguese became aware of an alternative passage south of Singapore island, which d'Erédia marked as the *estreito velho* or "old strait" in his maps. It fell to Gibson-Hill to sort out the confused nomenclature for the waterways in a much under-appreciated monograph published in 1956.[9] Gibson-Hill's interest in this problem of sailing past Singapore probably arose from his interest in sailing and boats. He was able to undertake this study of the evolving nomenclature for the four waterways for passage past Singapore because he had at his disposal, in the library of the old Raffles Museum, copies of 208 maps and charts relating to Singapore and Malay from the 16th to the 19th centuries that J.V.G Mills assembled in 1934.

Unfortunately, Gibson-Hill's insights into what early European cartography can tell us about Singapore's early modern history was ignored, if not dismissed, by the new generation of historians at the Department of History at the University of Malaya established in 1951 under Prof C. Northcote Parkinson. They took a very textual and archival documentary approach to Singapore history within its British colonial context. Parkinson's successor as Raffles Professor, K.G. Tregonning, declared that "modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only". As a result, Gibson-Hill's work was disregarded and the research undertaken by the History Department's staff and students focused largely on the "modern" post-1819 history of Singapore.

It was not until 1999 when new interest in Gibson-Hill's insights was revived in a Singapore History Museum publication entitled *Early Singapore 1300–1819: Evidence in Maps, Text and Artefacts*.[10] The publication followed a 1999 exhibition of artefacts recovered from archaeological excavations on Fort Canning and its environs since 1984. The exhibition provocatively suggested that the archaeologi-
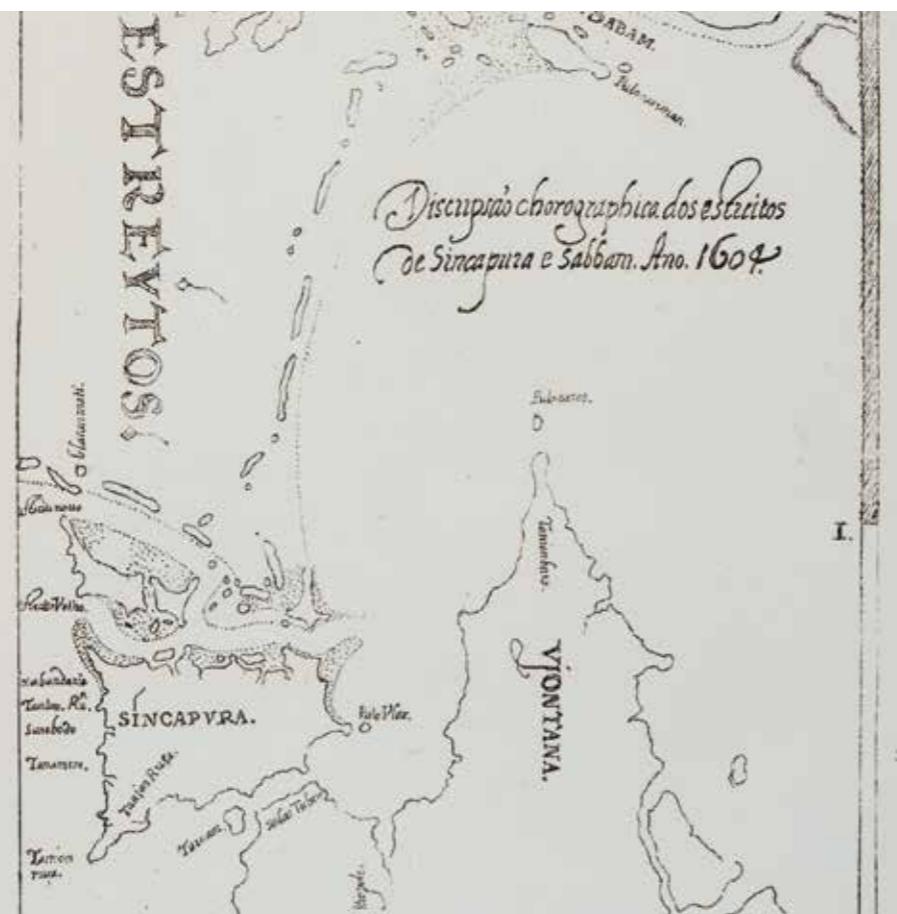
This map shows the Old Strait ("estreito velho") as a narrow channel running east-west of the southern coast of Singapore island. The New Strait ("estreito novo") is found further south of the Old Strait. This detail is taken from a 19th-century facsimile of Manuel Godinho de Eredia's 1604 map in *Malaca, L'Inde Orientale et le Cathay*. Collection of the National Library, Singapore.

cal evidence indicates a thriving settlement on Singapore since the beginning of the 14th century, which would then mark 1999 as the 700th anniversary of Singapore. However, the problem was linking the 14th-century port, which had been abandoned at the end of that century, to the East India Company outpost that Stamford Raffles established in 1819.

In his essay "Sailing Past Singapore",[11] Kwa Chong Guan argues that Gibson-Hill's charting of the use and disuse of the various channels for sailing past Singapore in early modern times provides a link from the 14th-century emporium at the mouth of the Singapore River to the East India Company outpost established by Raffles. Based on the sea and the channels the mariners were using to navigate past Singapore and its 60-odd surrounding islands, there was much activity, as documented in the sea charts and maps. The Malays, Portuguese, Dutch and British were all manoeuvring and challenging each other for control of the waters around Singapore. Raffles' establishment of an East India Company factory on Singapore was not so much about gaining territory but a continuation of this struggle for control over its waterways for British shipping in the region.

In another essay,[12] Peter Borschberg draws attention to a little-known schematic map of a Dutch-Portuguese naval confrontation at the eastern entrance of the Tebrau Straits in October 1603, which the German publisher Theodore de Bry had included as an appendix in his multi-volume compilation of early 16th-century voyages and travels to the East and West Indies, *Peregrinationum in Indiam Oriental et Indiam Occidentales*. Borschberg traces the circumstances leading to this naval battle to the Sultan of Johor's seizure, with Dutch aid, of a fully laden Portuguese carrack – the *Santa Catarina* – which was returning from Macao in February 1603. The Portuguese blockaded the Johor capital at Batu Sawa and captured and occupied the old capital at Johor Lama. It was during this Johor-Portuguese confrontation that the Dutch intervened in support of Johor and stepped up their attacks on Portuguese ships in the waters around Singapore. Johor-Dutch cooperation culminated in an alliance that provided the Dutch East India Company the rights and privileges to trade with Johor and an agreement to mount a joint attack on Portuguese-occupied Melaka.

A History Long Before 1819

From this perspective, these early modern sea charts are more than an encapsulation of European cartographic history of how Portuguese and Dutch mariners mapped landforms along the Straits of Melaka and Singapore in their search for the Golden Khersonese envisioned in the 2nd century by Ptolemy in faraway Alexandria. Instead, they point to a history that existed long before Singapore's official founding in 1819. These early modern sea charts and maps of the Straits of Melaka and Singapore are windows into the complex maritime history of Singapore in the 300 years before Raffles stepped ashore on our island. More importantly, these visual documents point to the battle for the security and control of the Straits between the European merchant empires, and Singapore's location in that struggle. ◆

Several of the maps mentioned in this article are currently on display at the exhibition "Land of Gold and Spices: Early Maps of Southeast Asia" at level 11, National Library Building (see text box for more details).

Notes

1 See David E. Parry's write up of his collection in his *The Cartography of the East Indian Islands; Insulae Indiae Orientalis* (London: Countrywide Editions, 2005).

2 J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps; Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. P. Laxton (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001)

3 See Jerry Brotton for a development of this argument in his *Trading Territories; Mapping the early modern world* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997)

4 Louis Renou, *La Géographie de Ptoléméé, L'Inde (VII, 1-4)* (Paris: Champion, 1925)

5 R Braddell, *A Study of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca*, MBRAS Reprint 7 (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1980)

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7 J. V. Mills, transl. & ed., *Eredia's Description of Malaca, Meridional India and Cathay*, Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society Reprint 14 (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1997).

8 J. V. Mills, "On a Collection of Malayan Maps in Raffles Library," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 15/iii (1937), 49–63.

9 Gibson-Hill's study was first published as "Singapore: Notes on the History of the Old Strait, 1580-1850," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 27/I (1954), 163-214 and expanded as *Singapore: Old Strait & New Harbour, 1300-1870*, Memoirs (Raffles Museum), no. 3 (Singapore: Government Printers, 1956).

10 J. N. Miksic & Cheryl-Ann Low, eds., *Early Singapore 1300s-1819, Evidence in Maps, Text and Artefacts* (Singapore: Singapore History Museum, 2004).

11 See "Sailing Past Singapore",in *Early Singapore 1300s-1819, Evidence in Maps, Text and Artefacts*, pp. 95–105

12 "A Portuguese-Dutch Naval Battle in the Johor River Estuary and the Liberation of Johor Lama in 1603," in Miksic & Low, eds., *Early Singapore*, 106-117 and Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits; Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), p. 60-112, which carries the narrative forward from that 1603 battle.

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From the Director's Chair

In candid, off-the-cuff conversations, four young auteurs talk about their upcoming works for the Singapore Memory Project film festival

Michelle Heng is a Librarian with the National Library of Singapore. She compiled and edited *Singapore Words Maps: A Chapbook of Edwin Thumboo's New and Selected Place Poems* as well as *Selected Poems of Goh Poh Seng*.

Royston Tan

Hailed as one of the most promising talents in the home-grown filmmaking industry, Royston Tan has won more than 40 international and local film awards. Most of his works focus on social issues and seek to challenge the boundaries of societal expectations. It comes as no surprise that some regard him as the *enfant terrible* of Singapore film. Tan set up his own film production company, *10twentyeight*, in 2008.

Synopsis: *Old Friends* is the final installation following the highly acclaimed documentary series *Old Places* (2010) and *Old Romances* (2012). In this latest documentary, food is the platter on which personal stories of ordinary people from all walks of life are collected, unravelled and served. By compiling these collective narratives of Singaporean food tales – in the process preserving intimate stories of joys and woes, love and loss – *Old Friends* offers future generations a taste of the past through our common passion for food.

How did your team go about collecting and unravelling the food stories featured in *Old Friends*?

After making *Old Places* and *Old Romances*, we've compiled a strong database of people who regularly contribute stories to us. The directors involved in this production happen to be equally passionate about collecting personal stories from all sources.

What made you choose food as a theme for the last of your heritage-themed documentaries?

We see food as a very important form of heritage in Singapore. While filming *Old Romances* we realised that the old, authentic taste of local food is changing, if not in danger of disappearing altogether as hawkers are replaced by food courts and coffee shops taken over by cafes. We see an urgent need to archive and celebrate these hawkers who dedicate their lives to perfecting their iconic dishes.

Which segment in *Old Friends* resonated most with you and your team, and why?

We're in the midst of production now; I think the research intrigues us the most. Every day, we make a new discovery on our tiny island.

Do you have a personal comfort food that you crave for every so often?

I love roasted duck! It has always been my favourite dish.

Sun Koh

One of the few women filmmakers in Singapore, Sun Koh's multiple-award-winning films have been screened in more than 30 festivals around the world. Her film career started in Singapore with her debut short film *The Secret Heaven* (2002) that won the Silver Hugo at the 38th Chicago International Film Festival. The film also won her the Best Director award at the 15th Singapore International Film Festival and audience choice awards in France, South Korea and Japan. In 2013, her film *Singapore Panda*, part of an omnibus feature *Letters From The South* with Tsai Ming Liang, Aditya Assarat and Royston Tan, premiered at the Busan International Film Festival and was sold to The Sundance Channel in 2014. She also directed the short film *The Secret Passion of Mdm Tan Ah Lian*, a short film commissioned by the National Arts Council for Silver Arts 2014.

Synopsis: *The Studio aka The Songs That Sang Her* is a docu-fantasia of Sun Koh's journey halfway round the world to Sweden where she worked from 2011 to 2013. She discovered just how uniquely Singaporean her taste in music was during this two-year sojourn.

How did you come to make a film featuring Lion Studios?

Lion Studios at 115B Commonwealth Drive is one of the last recording studios specialising in analogue recordings. During the 1980s and 90s, stars such as Mark Chan and Tracy Huang recorded at this studio, and in 1997 the soundtrack of Glen Goei's film *Forever Fever* was cut here too. It also happens to be the "birthplace" of national songs such as *We Are Singapore, Stand Up for Singapore* and *Count On Me Singapore* ... and that's what my story focuses on. I initially submitted my entry for the Singapore Memory Project film festival as a documentary but I encountered some issues with copyrights. So I decided to change my storyline to focus on my memories of home.

In a nutshell, *The Studio aka The Songs That Sang Her,* is about a woman who circles the globe only to find herself back in the same spot – home. It's a metaphorical journey of finding one's roots while being far from home.

Did you feel homesick when you were away?

I was living and working in Sweden when one day I caught myself singing *Stand Up for Singapore* in the bathroom. It took me by complete surprise because I never sang it outside of National Day parades or the classroom context! I realised just how much I was missing home when I heard myself singing that song ... it was quite a revelation for me.

Why is it a docu-fantasia?

The genre is inspired by Guy Maddin's 2007 film, *My Winnipeg*, which is a mix of personal history and elusive memories. My film is bookended by live action videos with the middle section made up of composite pictures from my iPhone photographs taken while I was living in Sweden. I got actress Serene Chen to "act" as me by inserting her into my iPhone photographs; for example, I superimposed Serene's face over mine in a picture of me during a radio interview overseas. I call it a docu-fantasia because the protagonist becomes true to her memories only when she fictionalises it. She is haunted by the incessant replaying of national songs in her mind and hears herself singing these national songs; it's quite a bizarre scenario!

So these songs become metaphors for homesickness?

Yes, and I wanted to highlight the fact that we are a very "musical" country – we like to compose songs for every occasion. You never know when you'll catch yourself singing these songs, like I did when I was very homesick... and of all places, in a bathroom in Sweden!

(Above) Film still of *The Studio aka The Songs that Sang Her* (2015), directed by Sun Koh. *Courtesy of Sun Koh.*
(Facing page) Production shot of *Old Friends* (2015) directed by Royston Tan. *Courtesy of Royston Tan.*

A scene from Wee Li Lin's *Centrepoint Kids. Courtesy of Wee Li Lin.*

Wee Li Lin

One of Singapore's pioneer female filmmakers, Wee Li Lin's prolific filmography includes 10 short films and two feature films as well as several tele-movies and commercials. She has won several awards both locally and internationally, most notably "Best Director" at the Singapore International Film Festival and a "Star Award" at the Shanghai International Film Festival for actress Joanna Dong for her starring role in the sopho-more feature *Forever*. Wee's films have travelled to prestigious festivals such as the Tribeca Film festival in New York, the Cairo International Film festival, the Shanghai International Film Festival, and the Hawaii International Film Festival, among others. She is presently working on several new projects and teaches part-time at film schools.

Synopsis: *Centrepoint Kids* recreates the vibrancy and colour of the iconic mall in the 1980s and the eye-catching subcultures and trends of the youths who hung out at the shopping centre. The film chronicles a youth's initiation into a group, learning what it takes to be a Centrepoint Kid. Often portrayed as delinquents in the media, *Centrepoint Kids* hopes to capture the positive spirit of these young rebels who sought to express themselves in unique, albeit, daring ways.

What inspired you to make Centrepoint Kids?

I was a child of the 1980s. I was from Singapore Chinese Girls' School which was then located at Emerald Hill. I used to spend almost every day

hanging out at Centrepoint and would see these really cool-looking kids. I never saw them doing anything wrong or dangerous. In fact, I wished I could be like them because I was always in my school uniform and school life was really mundane! These kids were full of colour and coolness.

Centrepoint Kids were mostly seen as a less-than-positive social phenomena in the 1980s; how did you capture the positive vibes of this youthful subculture?

The general consensus was that Centrepoint (CP) Kids were bad hats, but like I said, I saw them as cool fashionistas. The average Singapore kid (at that time) was pretty stifled and repressed (I thought) so to me they were daring and expressive. Different CP Kid gangs also had their own signature look. They dressed like pop-idols of that era like Madonna, Boy George and Cyndi Lauper. As a teen, I wanted to be part of a cool gang just like the CP Kids but alas, I didn't have enough guts.

Was it difficult casting for hip-hop and break-dancers for this short film? How did you find the protagonist?

It took some work as there were two major scenes in the film with breakdancers. I had an open casting call and luckily, we found some dancers who could also act. Most of the actors in my film are between 18 and 25 years old; I wanted to cast younger ac-tors but they were having their exams. The lead actress, Meishi Koon, is my best friend's niece and she had previously worked on one of my films as an extra. Meishi has this relatable goofiness and beauty that I was looking for and she captured the essence of the character so naturally. She was a perfect fit for this role.

Did you know any CP Kids when you were growing up?

I reconnected with some girls in my school through Facebook whom I knew to be CP Kids in order to get their stories. Unfortunately, there is a certain stigma attached to being a CP Kid so the few people I approached for interviews were still in denial about having been one. Only one girl opened up to me. Fortunately, she was very helpful and open.

One last question. Where did your crew find the neon-coloured outfits? Do you still own any 1980s-style relics in your own wardrobe?

We had to tailor some of the clothes and the rest were bought off the shelves at Bugis Village. It was good timing; baggy jackets and shirts came back into fashion last year so we bought those as well. As for relics of the 80s, I still keep some cassette tapes, vintage furniture and one or two toys. I wish I had kept my Walkman and some other T-shirts and clothes that are now probably floating in some Salvation Army universe!

Ervin Han

With over 14 years of experience in the telecom-munication, media and animation sectors, Han co-founded Robot Playground Media in 2013 to focus his company's creative efforts in develop-ing branded content in design and animation for commercial clients, original animated IPs and educational apps for kids.

Synopsis: *The Violin* is an animated short film that chronicles a journey spanning 80 years through the tumultuous times in Singapore's history, such as World War II, Merger and Independence.

***The Violin* is a visually arresting montage of Singapore's history over the span of 80 years from the perspective of the musical instrument. Why did you choose a musical instrument as the storyteller?**

We always knew there would not be any dialogue in the film, so the music really is the aural storyteller that has to carry and elevate the visuals for the film to work. The violin seemed natural because it has that haunting and evocative quality for the moods we wanted, and can also be emotional and poignant.

You pored through some really harrowing survivor accounts of Operation Sook Ching in 1942 where the Japanese rounded up and executed Chinese males who were suspected to be anti-Japanese. How did you and your team feel when you found these grim facts?

We read many books, went through scores of research documents at the National Archives of Singapore and visited museums to immerse ourselves in those dark chapters of our country's history. It was an important process as I wanted the team (including myself) to have a real understanding of those events, even if we didn't end up including some of those scenes in the film. One of our young artists actually asked me earnestly if she could work on fewer scenes of the Japanese bombing and Oc-cupation because it was too depressing. It showed that she connected personally and emotionally with the story. Hopefully, audiences will too.

You mentioned that many youths today seem to know about Singapore's history in fragments. What's the best takeaway you hope young Singaporeans will have after watching a retrospective historical animation like *The Violin*?

The Violin is a collection of fragments from our past, so it's not an exhaustive account, of course. What I hope it can do is to raise awareness and interest in some of these historical events and places, especially when many of them tend to fade in our memories, or worse, into oblivion. By using animation to bring these stories and places to life, hopefully we can make a fresh and more lasting impression, especially on the younger generation.

What is the most memorable segment in *The Violin* for you?

It's probably the scene where the Japanese bombed Singapore the first time on 8 December 1941. Many people don't realise that it was actu-ally part of the same Pacific attack that destroyed Pearl Harbour just hours before. Now, every year, when international news commemorate the Pearl Harbour attack of World War II, I'll remember what happened to Singapore almost at that same time.

Lastly, do you play the violin? Or any musical instrument for that matter?

I don't play the violin at all. I can get by playing the guitar if the audience is drunk enough! ◆

Catch "Rewind/Remind: A Singapore Memory Project Film Festival", featuring specially curated films by eight local directors, from 23 May 2015 to 20 June 2015 at the National Library Building, library@ esplanade, library@ orchard, Tampines Regional Library, Woodlands Regional Library as well as Bukit Merah Public Library. Find out more at bit.ly/ smpfilmfest

A scene from the animated film *The Violin* directed by Ervin Han. *Courtesy of Ervin Han.*

REWIND/ REMIND

A Singapore Memory Project Film Festival

More than just the hands of time are rewound in this specially curated selection of films that capture vignettes of Singapore's past. Join us at our very first Film Festival in May 2015.

Old Friends
By Chuan Pictures

Centrepoint Kids
By Bobbing Buoy Films

Kway Chap
By Sun Koh

The Violin
By Robot Playground Media
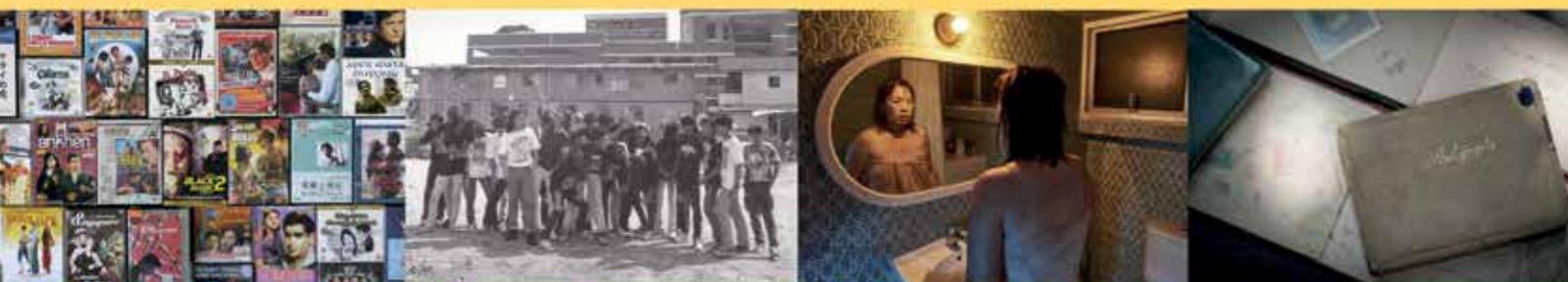
Singapore Film Locations Archive
By Toh Hun Ping

(re)Surfacing: 50 Years of Alternative Music in Singapore
By MGO Films

The Studio
By Sun Koh

Autograph Book
By Bobbing Buoy Films
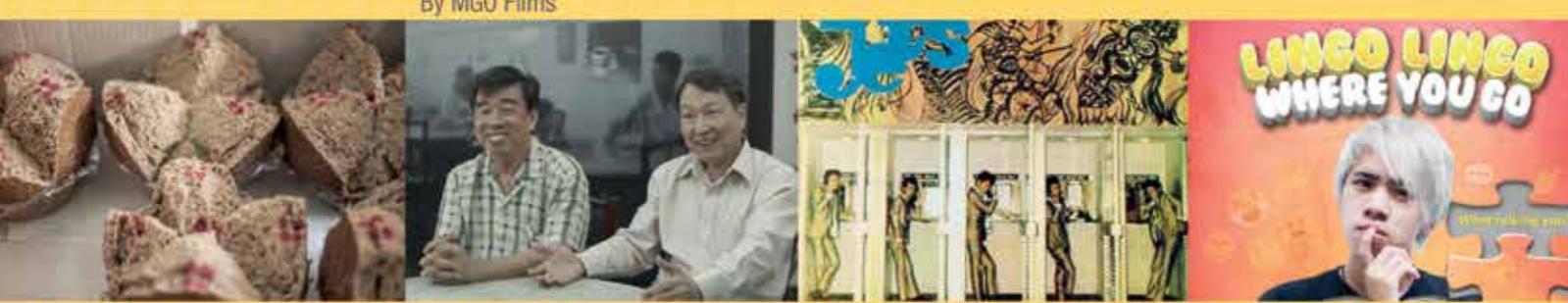
New Huat Kueh
By Caleb Huang

Simi Kopitiam?
By Little Red Ants Creative Studio

Showtime at Golden Venus – Swing!
By Joseph Sim

Lingo Lingo Where You Go
By J Team Productions

Check out **iremember.sg** for more information.

Singapore Memory Project
GIVING YOUR PAST A PRESENT

Life Stories

The Singapore Memory Project launches a new exhibition to honour our pioneer generation at Woodlands Regional Library

Georgina Wong is an Associate with the Exhibitions and Curation department at the National Library of Singapore. She is the curator of the exhibition "Greatest Gift of a Generation: Life Stories" – to be launched at the Woodlands Regional Library in late May 2015.

Struggles and hardship are part of the human condition. On the other hand, triumph in the face of great adversity is much less commonplace, and is often remarkable – especially when the struggle towards success is hard won. Many films celebrate stories of people overcoming unrelenting hardship to achieve great things, often played out in the dramatisation of the protagonists' suffering and their subsequent vindication.

Real life is much less sensational but the experiences are no less moving. Many people emerge from situations of adversity without necessarily achieving what the world would consider as spectacular or extraordinary. Real life suffering is subtler and less dramatic, and the definition of success is much more nuanced.

The Singapore Memory Project's upcoming exhibition, "Greatest Gift of a Generation: Life Stories", celebrates the quiet triumph of overcoming personal adversity. In conceptualising this exhibition, we sought out the generation born before Singapore's Independence – people who have experienced and witnessed great joy but also great hardship – to share their personal stories.

We did not uncover amazing feats of derring-do or film-worthy triumphs from the interviews. What is more remarkable, however, are the responses and perspectives of these 40 individuals to the hardships they had suffered.

When asked questions such as "Which time of your life did you struggle most?" or "How have your struggles impacted your life?" many of them responded stoically, "What struggles? That's just life." Yet their stories paint lives of genuine hardship, protracted years of struggle and an enduring spirit to rise above their situations.

In curating "Life Stories" we were inspired by the perseverance, humility and generosity of spirit shown by this generation of Singaporeans.

"Greatest Gift of a Generation: Life Stories" is a year-long exhibition that opens at the Woodlands Regional Library in late May 2015. The evocative portraits on display are taken by a group of photography majors from the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University. Each portrait showcases the distinctive style of the photographer while capturing the context of the story. Also included in the exhibition are five video clips featuring first-person narratives of selected individuals.

The Singapore Memory Project – an initiative by the National Library Board – is a nationwide movement that was started in 2011 to collect, preserve and provide public access to memories and stories relating to Singapore.

Helena Mahesan

Age 70
Assistant Director of Nursing at KK Women and Children's Hospital

When I was five, I was with my father at home one day. Suddenly, he fell over saying that he needed water and he was in pain. I ran to the kitchen, took a glass of water, and tried to feed him. Of course it spilled all over because he was collapsing. So I ran out to fetch my mother. She was nine months pregnant then, but she ran home, and we took my father to the hospital. Eventually, he died.

I was scared that day when the priest came. My mum spoke to me and my younger brother; she said she had to work, and I had to be cared for in the convent. So that was it, I accepted it and I went. It was fearful for a five-year-old girl to be separated from her mother. But somehow, you grow up very fast.

> The training that I have, and the experience, helps me to help other people. I've been there; I know and I understand.

Later on I became a nurse. It was while I was attached to the intensive care unit that my loved one was diagnosed with childhood cancer.

He passed on nine months into his diagnosis. I thought at the time that I didn't want to return to nursing. But the same good friend who had encouraged me to join nursing counselled me and said that I had to move on, and that nursing was a wonderful career I should not give up.

> I don't think I would ever think of anything but being a nurse.

Eventually in 2000 I was made to run the paediatric ward, which included the oncology ward. It was filled with children who had cancer.

Even up to today, if there is a patient with cancer, adult or child, because of my experience, it is easy to say to them "I understand".

A video still of Helena Maheson. Hers is one of the narratives that will be featured in the form of a video clip.

Portraits of Teo Khai Seng, who now owns nine fish farms. *Courtesy of Vinson Phua.*

Teo Khai Seng

Age 56
Owns a fish farm in Lim Chu Kang (His ninth farm so far)

I dropped out of school when I was 11. We were poor and had problems buying uniforms and text-books. The teachers were fierce towards me as I was dyslexic. I ended up playing truant frequently. As a result, I never learnt to read.

That same year I ran away from home and worked as a child labourer in a plastic factory. I worked from 8am to 10pm every day, with one day's break a month so that I could bring my salary home. I earned $40 a month – twice the amount my father would have earned back then.

When I was 21, I decided to go into fish farming. When I started, I rented a small plot of land in Hougang. My farm's output was small, so I had to work as a butcher and an insect catcher to continue with my passion for fish rearing.

When the government reclaimed the land used by my fish farm, the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) compensated me a few thousand dollars.

I remember I had to collect the cheque from the SLA office in Shenton Way. When I arrived I was desperate to find a toilet but could not find one as I could not read the signs. After collecting the cheque I spent hours looking for my car, again because I was illiterate.

This incident hit me very hard. I felt like an alien in my own country.

> I thought, "I'm young and supposed to be a pillar of society, but there I am, unable to read a simple thing like a street sign!"

From then on, I strove to learn all the words I came across. I started with novels, but moved on to Chinese history books to learn more rare and difficult words. I also read the subtitles on TV programmes to learn new words.

I have been through a lot of difficulties in life, especially challenges in fish farming, but I do not give up easily. I never felt life was hard as I began with nothing. As long as one does not give up easily, one can overcome anything.

> It was quite common for such things to happen then. Many families were torn apart, like mine. We drifted from one place to another.

Chew Chiang Tong

Age 80
Retired crane operator

My mother passed away when I was seven. At the time, my father was running a coffee shop, and my third sister was helping him.

I remember during the Malayan Emergency we lived in Johor Bahru and I was in primary three. The Malayan Communist Party was creating havoc; they were very ruthless back then. One night, while having dinner with my family, three men rushed in and shot my sister point blank.

I witnessed my sister being shot three times in her head. She was 21, and for some reason the Communist Party thought she was a spy.

I can never forget that scene and I have hated them ever since.

When I was 13, I came to Singapore to look for work. I remembered I could only afford a loaf of bread which cost 10 cents then, and I would have that with tap water every day for two months. I finally found a job serving coffee in a Hainanese coffee shop. They provided me with food and lodging, and I was paid more than $10 a month.

Later, I went to work at a worksite building – the Ulu Tiram army camp in Johor Bahru. In those days, we would have to manually load or unload the soil, sand, or wood. It was physically exhausting. I did this for a few years, travelling in and out of Singapore every day.

In 1957, I applied for Singapore citizenship;[1] from then on I moved from job to job to make a living. I was a motorcycle repairman, a cleaner, and when jobs were scarce in Singapore in the 1960s, I worked as a waiter, and even as a timber logger in Terengganu (Malaysia).

I learnt to operate a crane while working at a shipyard in Jurong. I was soon promoted to a foreman in 1978. We worked 44 hours a week and would even be paid overtime if we exceeded them! There were also other benefits my previous jobs did not afford me, such as annual and medical leave.

I retired in 2000 and nowadays I volunteer twice a week at the Resident Committee's karaoke as a karaoke jockey; I love to sing. I also help the folks at the elderly centre nearby with their outings. I even jog for 30 minutes with my wife every morning to keep fit! Although you may think I've had a hard life, I've never dwelled on the past. It's best just to live life to the fullest. You only live once right? ♦

Portrait of Chew Chiang Tong.
Courtesy of Vinson Phua.

Note

1 Registration for new Singaporean citizens began with the Citizenship Ordinance in November of 1957, eight years before the formation of the Independent Republic in 1965. Residents who had lived in Singapore for at least eight years were eligible to apply.

New Books
by the National Library Board, Singapore

Raffles and Hastings:
Private Exchanges Behind the Founding of Singapore
by John Bastin
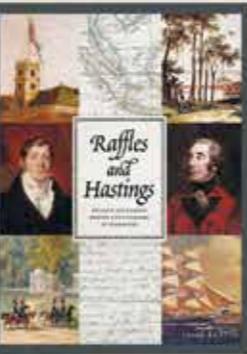
Find out the inside story of Singapore's founding through the personal correspondence between Stamford Raffles and the Marquess of Hastings. These private letters reveal the challenges they faced in manoeuvring within the Dutch-dominated East Indies. First published as *The Founding of Singapore, 1819* (2012).

Published by : National Library Board, Singapore, and Marshall Cavendish Editions
Publication Date : January 2015 (paperback, 236 pp)
Availability : Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and public libraries
Selected online and local bookshops

The Singapore House 1819–1942
by Lee Kip Lin
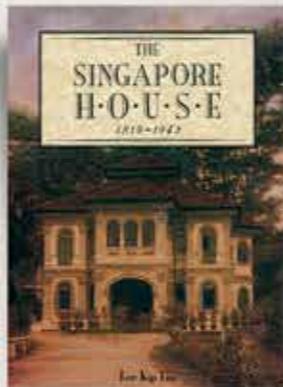
Step back into the past and discover the various domestic architectural styles that thrived in Singapore from 1819 to 1942 through over 400 illustrations, photographs, rare historical materials and architectural drawings by the late Lee Kip Lin. This is a reprint of a classic first published in 1988 by Times Editions.

Published by : National Library Board, Singapore, and Marshall Cavendish Editions
Publication Date : January 2015 (hardback, 232 pp)
Availability : Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and public libraries
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Visualising Space:
Maps of Singapore and the Region
by Peter Borschberg, Mok Ly Yng, Makeswary Periasamy and Kevin Khoo

Find out how the early Western powers perceived Asia as well as discover evidence of Singapore's existence before the arrival of the British through these essays and maps that detail our rich cartographical history.

Published by : National Library Board, Singapore
Publication Date : January 2015 (paperback, 152 pp)
Availability : Lee Kong Chian Reference Library and public libraries
Free download available on BookSG at eresources.nlb.gov.sg/printheritage

Through the Lens of Lee Kip Lin:
Photographs of Singapore 1965–1995
by Lai Chee Kien
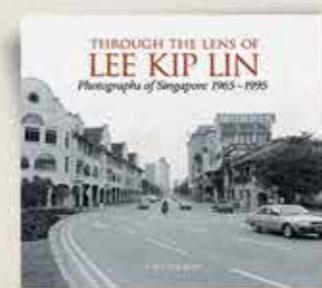
See Singapore during its nation building years and beyond through the eyes of the late Lee Kip Lin, who meticulously documented the island's changing landscape, street by street, from 1965 to 1995, in this coffee table book of nearly 500 photographs.

Published by : National Library Board, Singapore, and Editions Didier Millet
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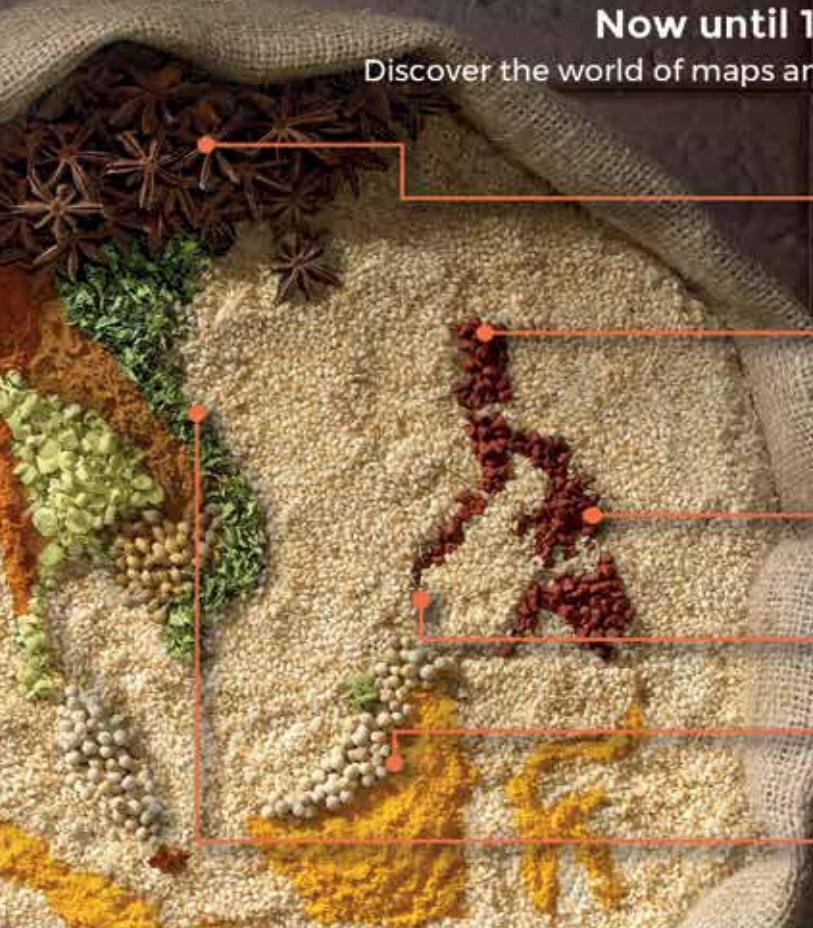
L11 — ISLAND OF STORIES: SINGAPORE MAPS

SEA STATE 8 SEABOOK
an Art Project by Charles Lim

L10 — LAND OF GOLD AND SPICES:
EARLY MAPS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA
AND SINGAPORE

MIND THE GAP: MAPPING THE OTHER

L9 — ISLANDS IN BETWEEN
...THE SEAS WILL SING AND THE WIND
WILL CARRY US... (FABLES OF NUSANTARA)
by Sherman Ong

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Curator's Tour Part 1 (Land of Gold and Spices)
Conducted in English | 15 May, 19 Jun, 10 Jul 2015, 7.30pm
Meeting point | Outside the Gallery, Level 10

Curator's Tour Part 2 (Island of Stories)
Conducted in English | 15 May, 19 Jun, 10 Jul 2015, 9.00pm
Meeting point | Outside the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library, Level 11

Tours are limited to 20 participants per session, on a first-come-first-served basis.
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