The Early Film Industry: The Films & The Entrepreneurs

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Learning Objectives:

• To debate on the “originality” of films

• To explain and discuss:
  – the development of the early film industry (how it came about)
  – the effects of Japanese Invasion on the film industry in Malaya and Singapore
The Debate of Origin

• How do you define the originality of a film?

• Does it lie on...
  – The **location** of the film being shot?
  – The **language** of the film?
  – The **narrative** of the film – what culture does it base?
  – The **nationality** of the director, actors, producers and film crew?
The Complex Cultural Interaction

• Is there any “pure” or “original” culture?

• It is, however, agreed that film production in Malaya (and Malaysia) epitomises and heralds the complex cultural interactions that happen to occur all the time.
THE EXHIBITION OF INDONESIAN FILMS

They Inspired the Making of “Local” Films
The Acceptance of Indonesian Films

• Between 1930 and 1941, almost all of the Indonesian films produced were brought into Singapore and the Peninsular. WHY?

Language: Malay-Batawi

Popularity Factors

Theatrical tradition (quite similar to Bangsawan)
Well-connected socio-religious values
The Popular Indonesian Films

• The popularity of the films from Indonesia may well have been the stimulus for the production of local Malay film.

• Example of popular Indonesian films:
  – Terpaksa Menikah (1932)
  – Terang Boelan (1938)
  – Alang-Alang (1938)

These films share some similarities. What are they?
The Magic Formula?

Language

How to Make a Popular (Profitable) Malay Film?

Venues of Screening

Content/Theme

Way of Presentation
The 1st Local Film?! 

- Around 1933 – 1934, **B.S. Rajhan** managed to convince an Indian businessman named S.M. Chisty to produce a film called **Laila Majnun**.

- Laila Majnun was directed by B.S. Rajhans with crew from **India**.
The Hybrid of Persian-Indian Story

• Majun, in the story, pines away in loneliness for his absent lover, Laila who wanders through the bazaars singing her praises. Majnun eventually becoming a madman.

• “Laila Majnun” was in fact a remake of an Indian film which was originally taken from a popular love-story of the Arabian tale.

What can you conclude?
The Acceptance of Laila Majnun

• “Laila Majnun” was *first screened at the Alhambra* in Singapore.

• Despite the success of the film, it was *not shown widely* owing to *problems with the distribution and cinema*, thus, it did not prove profitable.
The History of the Rich...

THE ENTREPRENEURS
Who/What Were They?

Chisty & Rajhans - MAFP

Tan & Wong Film

Loke & Ho - Cathay

Shaw Brothers
The Chisty and Rajhans team established a company called Malay Art Film Production (MAFP) after the making of Laila Majnun.

However, their efforts did not last long – the company and their filmmaking equipment were later sold to Shaw Brothers.
The Shaw Organisation was founded in Shanghai.

Sought for expansion opportunity (to distribute films) in S.E. Asia – Singapore.

Brought in silent films from China but boycotted by the alliance of cinemas in Singapore.
Shaw Brothers & the Shanghai Connection

1927

- Began operating their 1st “proper” cinema in Tanjong Pagar, S’pore.
- Runme travelled to Ipoh and Penang in order to seek the opportunity to build cinemas while Run Run in charged of the business in S’pore.
- In order to “test” the market, they used...
  - Makeshift (tent) cinema
  - Retrofitted Bangsawan theatres – joint venture with its owners
  - Mobile cinema – bicycle & van carrying screening equipments
  - Amusement parks

1939: Owns 139 cinemas in Singapore, Malaya, Java & Indo-China.
Monopoly – Big Money!

- After investing heavily in film exhibition, Runme & Run Run – realised the need to ensure continuous products for their film theatres, meanwhile working towards a monopoly system by making it difficult for competitors to enter the market.
Where to Get the Manpower?

- **In 1937, SB** brought in film equipment & production crew from Shanghai and **set up a film production studio** in Jalan Ampas, Singapore.
Loke Wan Tho: Cathay

- Loke Wan Tho, a wealthy businessman, entered the big screen entertainment business as a cinema owner.
The Expansionist Project

- Dato’ Loke worked out expansion plan with Dato’ Ho Ah Loke.

- They formed a company called Loke Theatres Limited and extended their chain of cinemas and bought over those in Borneo.

- By 1957 he already control over 39 cinema halls in Malaya and Singapore.
Tan and Wong Film Company

- Tan and Wong Film Company had already established a studio in Java as early as 1928 before they established one in the Singapore. WHY?

- It brought competition to SB with their film “Menantu Derhaka” directed by B.S. Rajhans.
What happened to Film Industry in Malaya?

THE JAPANESE INVASION
Shaw Brothers and Japanese Invasion

- “Topeng Shaitan” (The Devil’s Mask) marked the temporary closure of the Shaw studio in Ampas Road, Singapore.

- The Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941 shut down local film production for six years.

- All cinemas belonged to SB were seized and used to screen Japanese propagandist films monitored by the Nippon Eigasha in their efforts of “Nipponisation”.

WHY?
The Japanese Occupation (1941 – 45)

• The Shaw studio in Singapore was taken over by the Japanese who then formed an organisation *under its government propaganda machinery.*
Propaganda Feature Films

• The organisation brought actors and technicians from Japan and together with local supporting actors and the British prisoners of war and managed to churn out two propaganda films – “March to Singapore” and “Marai No Tora”.
Resources:

Books:

Websites:
1) [http://www.shaw.sg/sw_abouthistory.aspx?id=2%20132%20219%2037%20209%20178%20249%2068%20124%20188%20172%20153%20233%20110%20175%20165](http://www.shaw.sg/sw_abouthistory.aspx?id=2%20132%20219%2037%20209%20178%20249%2068%20124%20188%20172%20153%20233%20110%20175%20165) as browsed on February 8, 2012.