

Yvonne Michalik (Ed.)

Singapore Independent Film

SCHÜREN

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Introduction

Right from the start, film was an «international phenomenon»¹. A thriving film scene developed almost simultaneously in Russia, Germany, France and America. Just a few decades later, film also slowly established itself in Asian, South American and African countries. In addition to the national and local film scenes, commercially organized industries have formed in the course of the ongoing expansion and internationalization. Even though the international trade in dramaturgically and aesthetically uniform films – in particular the Hollywood films – represents a case in point for the homogenization of the film culture, the long history of film shows the existing abundant diversity. In addition to the globally distributed films of the American film industry, local film industries have given rise to a wide variety of different filmic practices and topics. These films from Europe, Asia, South-America and Africa provide important insights into culture-specific topics and cultural practices. Worldwide developments in national film industries thus guarantee the cultural diversity of the global film industry. They are an expression of plurality. And this increasingly has to be taken into account when discussing film as an expression of the world culture.

Unfortunately these national film scenes – especially those of Southeast Asia – have also been neglected in scientific film research. But most of these countries have an old and rich film culture. Even Singapore, the multi-ethnic island country and city-state, can look back on a long film history.² The lack of interest in the Singaporean film scene is due to the fact that Asian film debates mostly focus on Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Indian films. Southeast Asia – and with it Singapore – is still not internationally recognized as a part of this Asian film culture. But the film movements in these countries – especially the independent movements – play an important role. They reflect cultural authenticity and therefore reveal other tendencies of the Asian film market.

- 1 Hicketheir, Knut (2001): Hollywood, der europäische Film und die kulturelle Globalisierung, in: Wagner, Bernd (Ed.): Kulturelle Globalisierung. Zwischen Weltkultur und kultureller Fragmentierung. Klartext, Essen, p. 113.
- 2 Cf. Uhde, Jan/Uhde NG, Yvonne (2000): Latent Images. Film in Singapore. Oxford University Press in collaboration with Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore.
Cf. Uhde, Jan/Uhde Ng, Yvonne (2010): Latent Images. Film in Singapore. National University of Singapore Press in association with the Singapore Film Commission, Singapore.
Cf. Millet, Raphael (2006): Singapore Cinema. Edition Didier Millet, Singapore.

Although Singapore is one of the smallest countries in Southeast Asia, with only 5 million inhabitants, it is also the richest country in the region. Singapore is the world's fourth leading financial center and is one of the economically fastest growing countries in the world. From the colonial past until today, Singapore's film scene has become emancipated; nowadays Eric Khoo also receives recognition in Cannes. But unfortunately very little is known about the other filmmakers from this pulsating and vivid Asian film scene, such as Royston Tan, Jack Neo, Kelvin Tong, Glen Goei, Chee Kong Cheah, Victric Thng, Tania Sng, Tan Pin Pin and others.

Also the early period of filmmaking in Singapore has not been widely researched. But the first Singaporean film was shot as early as 1933/1934 by B. S. Rajhans (LAILA MAJNUN). P.Ramlee is considered to be the pioneer of Singaporean filmmakers. The Shaw brothers and the Cathay Organization are mentioned as the most important producers and distributors of early Singaporean films. Timothy Barnard, for example, emphasizes that Shaw Brothers and Cathay produced most of the 250 films made in Singapore between 1940 and the late 1960s.³ Jan and Yvonne Uhde divide the history of Singaporean film into several phases and point out the decline in the number of film productions from the 1960s onward.⁴ After this decline, the industry started to thrive again in the 1990s.⁵ From 1990 until today, films have been created that explicitly focus on own cultural topics. These new films provide a diversified view of the Singaporean culture and have a critical approach to the own society. Thanks to the multi-faceted depiction by Singaporean filmmakers, but also thanks to the special filmic devices used, it is hoped that these films will increasingly attract attention at international film festivals.

This book – the second volume of a series of scientific editions on Southeast Asian films (the first book looked at the Indonesian cinema) – fills a gap by offering a new perspective on this vivid film culture that has not yet been satisfactorily recognized on an international level. Therefore this book starts off with an historical overview of Singaporean filmmaking in the articles by **Philip Cheah**, who describes the history of Singapore's cinema until 2002, as well as by **Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde**, who look at the history of Singapore's cinema from 2002 until 2010. Secondly it presents selected contributions that reflect the national film culture and discusses the main independent films and filmmakers of the past and present.

The chapter by **Timothy P. Barnard** focuses on the five films that changed the culture of filmmaking in Singapore during the «Golden Era» of Malay filmmaking from 1940 until 1965. Although not all of these films were among the most popular of the era, they signaled a shift in how films were made and understood in the city-state during a period in which major issues of technology, narrative and independence were being debated. Bar-

3 See in this volume: Barnard, Timothy P. (2010): Films of Change in Early Singaporean Film History.

4 Cf. Uhde, Jan/Uhde Ng, Yvonne (2010): Latent Images. Film in Singapore. National University of Singapore Press in association with the Singapore Film Commission, Singapore, p. 14-53.

5 Cf. Uhde, Jan/Uhde Ng, Yvonne (2010): Latent Images. Film in Singapore. National University of Singapore Press in association with the Singapore Film Commission, Singapore, p. 72ff.

nard therefore focuses on films ranging from MUTIARA (THE PEARL – 1940) to BADANG (1962). Through a discussion of these films, a better understanding of the shifts in filmmaking and the goals of many of these early films is achieved.

Charles William Leary concentrates on the films of Rajendra Gour from the 1960s and 1970s, which have recently been rediscovered and are being preserved by the Asian Film Archive. Gour's films straddle various categories of fiction, documentary and experimental filmmaking, while at heart always evoking the strength of the family and inspiring hope for the local community. All films are self-funded and promoted at international film festivals; therefore Gour can be considered one of Singapore's earliest independent filmmakers.

After this historical approach, the following contributions deal with the current Singaporean filmmakers and films. **Timothy R White** focuses on the director Eric Khoo. His debut feature film MEE POK MAN (*The Fish-ball Noodle Man*, 1995) marked the rebirth of Singapore's film industry. Although most of the Singaporean films that followed MEE POK MAN at least make an effort to appeal to that nation's multi-ethnic population, they are designed primarily for Singapore's Chinese majority. They also evidence a break with the Singaporean films of the 1950s and 1960s, which were aimed at the Malay-speaking audience in both Singapore and Malaysia. Khoo's films, however, retain a strong link with this past, in both their multi-ethnic appeal and their respect for the traditions of Singapore's film history and folk beliefs. White takes a look at these aspects of Khoo's films, from MEE POK MAN to his most recent film, MY MAGIC (2008).

Anne Ciecko's article examines commercial Singaporean cinema of the new millennium and focuses on feature films made over the past decade, directed by Chee Kong Cheah (CheeK), Glen Goei, Jack Neo and Royston Tan. Ciecko addresses aspects of stylistic, cultural, linguistic, and generic hybridity and local/global negotiations – particularly through musical and comedic elements.

Stewart Chang analyzes recent Singaporean films to explore connections between economic globalization and the evolution of sexual consumerism across more gender-equal lines. Beginning with Eric Khoo's bleak criticism of legalized prostitution in MEE POK MAN (1995), he discusses the stereotypical gender and racial hierarchies implicit in sex trafficking and sex tourism in Southeast Asia. Drawing from Lisa Rofel's discussion of the desirous Asian subject, he then turns to more recent portrayals of prostitution in Woo Yen Yen and Colin Goh's SINGAPORE DREAMING (2006) and Jack Neo's LOVE MATTERS (2009) to analyze how the promotion of female sexual entrepreneurship and consumerism has created alternative but problematic models of female empowerment based on Western liberal models.

Yvonne Michalik's article focuses on the debut film SALAWATI by the permanent resident from the USA, Marc X Grigoroff. She investigates how the visual portrayal of the urban areas and the multi-cultural identities in this film reflect a sociological type with a «glocal» viewpoint. The glocal aspect of the film results from the biographical background

of director and scriptwriter Marc X Grigoroff. The filmmaker was born in America and has been living in Singapore since 1997; therefore his look at the Singaporean society is always from the viewpoint of an immigrant. His perspective is that of a person who is present locally, but anchored globally. Michalik also looks at the relationships between the main protagonists in the light of this glocal viewpoint. She analyzes the way these aspects are expressed in the dramaturgical narrative and audio-visual language of the film, so that both aspects – local and global – can be viewed in relation to the spatial representation of the city. The focus is on the question of which audio-visual means are used to visualize this urban, multi-ethnic society and how the spatial representation of the city reflects the social mosaic of the social groups as a glocal construct.

Craig Brand McTurk focuses on the documentary genre in Singapore. First McTurk gives a brief overview of the documentary movements in Singapore and then focuses on the main women filmmakers of the present, especially the best-known one: Tan Pin Pin. Additionally the article introduces the current women filmmakers, who are starting to increasingly use this genre. The main interest of the article lies in analyzing how Singapore's culture and values manifest themselves in documentary films made here.

Ben Thiam Tan looks at experimental films in Singapore. It covers Rajendra Gour as an early experimental filmmaker and also focuses on the 1960s–1970s, as well as Eric Kho's short films in the early 1990s and the recent experimental films from cross-disciplinary artists such as Charles Lim, X'ho, Brian Gothong Tan, Sherman Ong and others.

These contributions from renowned Singaporean, Canadian, American and German film experts close a gap by introducing this Asian film culture, which is increasingly gaining importance for understanding the film movement as a hybrid and heterogenic movement. Therefore this volume also includes some interviews with the filmmakers themselves, who offer insight into their own viewpoints.

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Beginnings and Starting Over – Singapore Film until 2002

Liu Peh Jing, who wanted to make films for the Chinese immigrant population in Singapore, produced the first Singapore film, *THE IMMIGRANT* (XIN KE, 1926). Two years before, Runme Shaw had arrived in Singapore from Shanghai, to set up the Hai Seng Company, which later became the Shaw Organisation, one of the two exhibition giants in Singapore.

The first Malay feature film, *LAILA MAJNUN* (1933), was produced in Singapore by the Motilal Chemical Company of Bombay (Mumbai) and directed by B S Rajhans. The success of this film convinced the Shaw Brothers to enter Malay film production in 1940, to cater to the expanding markets in Malaya and Indonesia. Their first film was *PEARL* (*MU-TIARA*, 1940), a comedy about a fisherman who finds a giant pearl. Malay Film Productions Limited, under the Shaw Brothers, went on to make over 300 Malay-language films.

Their greatest discovery was singer, actor, director, writer, composer, P Ramlee, who first appeared in films in the late 1940s, became the company's first Malay director, with *THE TRISHAW PULLER* (*PENARIK BECA*, 1955), made blockbuster after blockbuster and won awards at the regional film festivals in Asia in the 1950s and '60s.

The second exhibition giant, Cathay Organisation, was set up by Loke Wan Tho in 1935. Cathay too went into production with their company, Cathay-Keris, in 1953. Their discovery was Hussein Haniff, considered by critics to be a serious artistic director compared to P Ramlee's more populist leanings.

Along with Cathay and Shaw, Kong Ngee Co. Ltd was the other important film studio. In 1955, it produced its first film, *DRAGONET* (1955), and went on to make dozens of Teochew opera films and Hokkien dialect films. But by 1963, Kong Ngee's problems with production and management forced it to close its studios.

Labor union problems, and the introduction of television and then color film, also reduced profits and market size for Shaw and Cathay. The Shaw Brothers' Studio closed in 1967, while the Cathay-Keris Studio shut down in 1972.

Singapore's Chinese Productions in Hong Kong (1955–1970)

While Cathay-Keris Productions was based in Singapore, and produced 115 Malay language films between 1953 and 1972, its sister company, Motion Picture and General In-

vestment Co. Ltd (MP&GI), based its studios in Hong Kong and produced 200 Chinese language films between 1955 and 1970.

These Singapore-produced, but Hong Kong-made films, are now an integral part of the Hong Kong film history. Cathay's gradual entry into film production actually started in 1949, when it began to distribute Hong Kong films in Singapore, films made by Yung Hwa Motion Pictures Industries Limited.

Owned by Lee Tsu Yung, the Yung Hwa company had long courted Cathay's Chairman, Loke Wan Tho, to sit on its board. In 1952, Singapore's Loke gave loans to Hong Kong's Lee in return for an exclusive six-film distribution deal that would allow Singapore-produced (and made) films to be distributed in Hong Kong. The Singapore-produced films were well received by Hong Kong audiences, and they continued thus for a long time, winning awards and creating stars.

When the Yung Hwa Company's fortunes plummeted in 1955, Cathay stepped in to manage the Hong Kong Company and recover its outstanding loan. In 1956, the Cathay subsidiary, Motion Picture and General Investment Co. Ltd (MP&GI) was registered in Hong Kong.

With this step, Cathay established its own Chinese film empire and was now competing with the Shaw Organisation on all fronts – exhibition, distribution and production of both Malay and Chinese films. Almost immediately, MP&GI had its first hit, EVAN YANG'S MAMBO GIRL (1956), which tapped into the Latin craze of that time and featured Grace Chang, a young actress who sang and danced.

That set up MP&GI's stable of leading ladies, including Lin Dai, Lin Tsui, Li Mei and Yeh Fung. The Hong Kong-based company made both Mandarin and Cantonese films and its spool of hits continued to roll – Yeh Fung in SISTER LONG LEGS (1960), Lin Tsui in BEWARE OF PICKPOCKETS (1957), and Lin Dai in THE MORE THE MERRIER (1959).

The studio was churning out between 12 and 14 films annually, consisting of romantic films, comedies, musicals, suspense dramas, biopics and children's films. But Loke, based in Singapore, was not interested in just box-office success for his Hong Kong films. He also cherished critical acclaim. That came in 1957, when Lin Dai won the Best Actress Award for GOLDEN LOTUS (1957) at the 4th Asian Film Festival. MP&GI was on a roll when it discovered its next big star, Yu Ming, who took the Best Actress Award in 1959 and 1960, for HER TENDER HEART (1959) and ALL IN THE FAMILY (1960) respectively.

Strains within the company started to show in 1961. Intense competition caused disagreements between the Singapore and Hong Kong managers on issues such as budget control and distribution. In 1964, an adventurous era of Singapore film production ended when Loke Wan Tho was killed in an air crash.

Choo Kok Leong, Loke's brother-in-law, who renamed the company Cathay Organisation (Hong Kong) Ltd, took over MP&GI. As martial arts films started taking off in the late 1960s, Cathay found it hard to shift its focus from drama and comedy to action. Cathay's Hong Kong Studio finally closed in 1970, when Choo decided to focus the company's business on distribution.

The 1970s: The Decade of the B-Movie

When Cathay-Keris closed its Singapore film studio in 1972, five years after the Shaw Brothers had closed their Singapore studio, the golden age of the Singapore Malay film industry also ended. But its impact on popular culture did not, and the passion for film led to a new age of independents. Almost immediately after the Cathay-Keris Studio had closed, the independents began to make films.

Among the first was director Tony Yeow. Inspired by the popularity of Hong Kong star Bruce Lee, Tony Yeow made *RING OF FURY* (1973), the same year Bruce Lee had died. *RING OF FURY* starred Peter Chong, a real karate black belt champion. Of this film, Yeow said: «We had an entire cast of real martial artistes, sometimes we would just let the camera run during the fight scenes because they were so good». Ironically, the film was banned.

Yeow believes that the story about a debtor chased by moneylenders had a secret society-gangster element that provoked the ban by the censors. Because the censors do not normally disclose their reasons for banning a film, conjecture about reasons cannot be officially confirmed. The film was finally shown on TV in Singapore in 1997.

Most of the new independents could not sustain numerous productions but some made a mark. If you flip through several B-Movie encyclopedias, you will find a cult film called *CLEOPATRA WONG* (1977). Directed by Bobby A Suarez (aka George Richardson), the film created a fusion of martial arts and spy movies. In a way, Singaporean producer Sunny Lim, who was a former wrestling promoter, was Singapore's answer to Roger Corman.

CLEOPATRA WONG starred Marie Lee as an Interpol agent, who destroys a counterfeit-ing ring. The film spoofed the spy movies of that time with campy B-movie bravado. The set pieces included *CLEOPATRA WONG* battling a group of Indian wrestlers, storming into a hilltop convent and fighting hoods dressed as nuns.

But like Yeow, the Suarez-Lim films also took off on the Bruce Lee craze, giving it a special twist. They fused the influence of Bruce Lee's kung-fu films with the bionic gadgetry of the Six Million Dollar Man TV series. What emerged were *BIONIC BOY* (1976) and *DYNAMITE JOHNSON* (1979). Both starred 11-year-old Johnson Yap, who played a child agent with bionic strength and who actually performed his own stunts.

While their three films were successful at the box-office (even in the Philippines and Malaysia where they were also released), Lim still found it hard to raise funds and became increasingly frustrated at dealing with Singapore's film censors and their inscrutable ways. Lim left Singapore and continued his film career in Malaysia, where he made 16 more films.

For Lim Jit Sun of Chong Gay Productions, being an independent producer was not enough; he dreamt of rebuilding a film studio. As most of the Singapore film talent had migrated to Malaysia with the closure of the Cathay-Keris Studio in 1972, Lim hired 10 full-time actors from the local theatre scene. He then trained them using talent brought in from Hong Kong. Lim succeeded in making three films, no prints of which survive today.

The first two, *Master of the House* and *Family of Degeneration*, used an entire 20-member crew from Hong Kong, comprising the director and film technicians. But his third and

final film, *TWO SIDES OF THE BRIDGE* (1976), was a full-fledged local production. A tale of disparity between the rural and urban populace, the film reflected the aspirations of the young Chinese-educated of that time.

Directed and scripted by Malaysian-born Chinese Lim Ann (aka Lim Meng Chew), who was a Singapore permanent resident at the time, the film details the Singapore-and-Malaysia divide well, contrasting the simpler, less hectic, rural life of Malaysians in a fishing village across the Causeway to Singapore with their more business-minded, urbanized neighbors in Singapore itself (the Causeway to Singapore being the bridge in the film). But the poor box-office receipts for his films and Lim's untimely death led to the closure of his film production company.

The 1970s were important for one more film – American director Peter Bogdanovich's much-overlooked *ST JACK* (1979). Based on the Paul Theroux novel and set during the Vietnam War, *ST JACK* is about a good-hearted American pimp, Jack (played by Ben Gazzara), who takes care of US soldiers staying in Singapore for their R&R (Rest and Recreation).

The pimp finds himself tangling first with local Singapore triads and then the CIA. The film has been criticized by English critics in *Time Out Film Guide* for the way in which Bogdanovich «turns the character into a sentimental paragon of virtue and softens the hard profile of America's Far-East imperialism, ending up with a film that reeks of the hollow travelogue sincerity it purports to despise».

Time Out may be right about «America's Far-East imperialism», but it fails to take into account the Singapore censors, which banned the film since Bogdanovich filmed a script different from the one he submitted. (It must be added that it was the Singapore crew who convinced Bogdanovich that his script would not pass the censors. On the crew was Tony Yeow who himself experienced censorship with *RING OF FURY*.)

For many Singaporeans, starved of a realist film industry that concentrated on Singapore locations and social mores, the film succeeds in capturing many aspects of Singapore of that era. *ST JACK* thus functions as Singapore's social and visual heritage.

As the Sunny Lim films were action-based, locations were often foreign and exotic and failed to capture local Singapore color substantially. *ST JACK*, on the other hand, recorded Singapore's infamous Bugis Street (identical film name: *BUGIS STREET*, 1995), where transsexuals and whores plied their trade, and went the distance in capturing both lower class Chinatown and uptown Orchard Road. (Interestingly, the film's cinematographer was none other than Robby Müller, noted for his excellent camerawork in the films of Wim Wenders.) For Singaporeans, all this is particularly significant, as most of these areas and buildings, particularly in Bugis Street and Chinatown, have since been torn down and redeveloped.

Meanwhile, a young Eric Khoo (later to emerge as one of the key directors in the renaissance of Singapore film in the 1990s) was on the set of *ST JACK*, when his father sponsored his hotel, the Goodwood Park, as a location for the film. But although *Time Out* finds the film tame, in Singapore, *ST JACK* was banned, and finally premiered here in 1997, at the 10th Singapore International Film Festival. It was an emotional moment for the Singaporean cast members and crew who were watching it for the first time.

Overall, despite the enthusiasm for a film industry, the 1970s only produced a total of less than 10 feature films, which was a steep drop in production, considering that the golden age produced more than 24 films per year.

1980s – Encouraging Investment: The Government’s New-Found Interest in Film

In the early 1980s, Chinese TV drama received a boost when Hong Kong expertise was recruited. This led to new highs in audience ratings, when Singapore Chinese TV serials started having the same glamour and excitement as Hong Kong TV serials. In 1988, the Singapore authorities renewed their interest in having a film industry. This was in large part due to the talent migrating out of Hong Kong in anticipation of the colony’s hand-over to China in 1997.

To woo investors, the Economic Development Board (EDB) drew up a list of incentives for film production and related activities. Singapore hoped to benefit from the departing talent pool.

The first task was rebuilding its studios and this was accomplished when Deacon Chiu, Chairman of Hong Kong’s Asia Television, invested S\$70 million to build a Chinese cultural village with three small film studios within it. The Tang Dynasty Village theme park was finally opened in 1992, and while its studio was initially used by a Hong Kong production, it has not proved to be a popular site. There was also talk that the Italian film company, Cecchi Gori, would build a S\$120 million film studio in Singapore, but by the end of the ‘80s they had shelved the project.

The Singapore International Film Festival

Perhaps this decade will be best remembered for the founding of the Singapore International Film Festival in 1987, by actor, set-designer and architect Geoff Malone.

While Singapore’s comparatively small population of three million people had always limited its potential as a market for indigenous Singapore film, Malone recognized that Singapore did have an avid movie-going population. In the mid-1980s, at least 20 million cinema tickets were sold each year in Singapore, which means a per capita admission ratio of one to seven (an exceptionally high figure by comparison with international attendance figures) and box-office sales of over S\$100 million.

The Singapore International Film Festival was born with the twin objectives of enhancing film appreciation and stimulating interest in local filmmaking. It began with a modest program of 50 films. Today, it screens over 350 films from over 40 countries.

The Festival is especially noted internationally for its dedicated focus on Asian cinema – at least half the films screened are from Asia. Its annual audience of over 50,000 view-

ers have been gradually exposed to the history of Asian cinema through its programs of retrospectives, and to new trends in Asian film, with its Silver Screen Awards for the best achievements in the continent (the categories include an award for Best Young Cinema).

While the festival was the only South-East Asian international film festival when it was founded in 1987, there are now an abundance of other South-East Asian international film festivals.

The 1990s: On the Upswing

In 1990, the EDB set up a Creative Services Unit to nurture an environment for creative businesses. The Unit attracted Atlab, a film processing laboratory, to open in Singapore. This, in turn, encouraged the expansion and capitalization of production houses which, in turn, established Singapore as a post-production centre. Finally, in 1993, a diploma course in film production was introduced in the Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

The establishment of production and post-production facilities yielded concrete results. *The Last Blood*, the first Hong Kong film to be shot entirely in Singapore, was released in 1990. With a S\$10 million budget and starring three Hong Kong stars – Andy Lau, Alan Tam and Eric Tsang – this was the first production by a Hong Kong company that had based itself in Singapore. Two other Hong Kong productions followed: *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL* (1990) and *INSANITY* (1990).

MEDIUM RARE, the first Singapore English-language feature, was made in 1991. Dogged by production problems, the film was based on the story of a real life Singapore murderer, Adrian Lim. However, as in the early history of Singapore cinema, the talent employed in making this film was mainly foreign. The director was British, while the two main leads were American.

However, the scriptwriters and producer were Singaporean. The film failed. While it cost S\$1.5 million, it only made S\$130,000 at the box-office. Critically, it was regarded as unsuccessful, particularly in its inability to fully confront the subject matter – the gruesome nature of the murders, a constraint imposed by censorship considerations. Its producer, Errol Pang, later lamented that the film would have benefited from the new rating system.

The government finally introduced a rating system in July 1991, with a 'Restricted' rating for films with adult themes, limited to those over 18 years of age. But a public outcry forced the censors to change the 'Restricted' rating to a 'Restricted (Artistic)' or 'R(A)' rating two months later, which allowed these same films to be seen only by those 21 years and above.

This protest arose as a result of a deluge of sexploitation films, which were released when the rating was first introduced. A survey by *The Straits Times* showed that 46 out of 55 theatres were showing R-rated films during this period. Still, the new rating system was a turning point for the Singapore International Film Festival.

Prior to that, the festival had to withdraw several award-winning films whose directors, producers or distributors refused to allow cuts. The rating system allowed the festival to screen most of its program without cuts and helped to build its credibility with distributors and among international critical circles. But many films still could not clear censorship leading the festival to begin an «Uncut» screening policy.

Emergence of New Singaporean Directors in the 1990s

In 1991, the Singapore International Film Festival organized its first competition for Best Singapore Short Film. Its discovery was Eric Khoo, who won the prize with *August*, a somber twist on a tale of adultery told from a dog's point of view. Khoo went on to make *CARCASS* (1992), a 50-minute video, which had a film-within-film structure, about a business executive, whose life was juxtaposed against that of a lowly butcher.

In 1994, Khoo's short film, *PAIN* (1994), was banned for its sadomasochistic tale and graphic scenes. Yet the jury awarded it the Best Short Film Prize, which included film stock and sponsored post-production facilities. That gave Khoo the opportunity to make *MEE POK MAN* (1995), his debut feature. Using the same lead actor as in *CARCASS* (Joe Ng), the films shared many similarities, with the former serving as the blueprint for the latter.

Considering that the film was about a noodle seller (*mee pok* is a flat noodle), who falls in love with a prostitute, it was immensely popular on the international film festival circuit, and was invited to over 30 festivals. *MEE POK MAN* was essentially the first realist feature made in Singapore since the Golden Age. For that reason, it was also especially interesting to Singaporeans, who were curious about the working class portrayed on the big screen.

The year 1995 also saw the production of *BUGIS STREET*, a second attempt at portraying the sleaze of this infamous tourist spot. This time it was by Hong Kong director Yonfan, and since the street had already been redeveloped in the early 1980s, the film tried to reinvent the nostalgia of the venue's peak in the '60s and '70s.

In 1996, the Cathay Organisation, which had largely confined its activities to film distribution, re-entered the film production business. Their film was Ong Keng Sen's *Army Daze*, based on a popular comedy by Michael Chiang, about the life of army recruits. The film was the first box-office success in this new era, with takings of S\$1.6 million. Based on the lives of young army recruits, the film started the trend for the use of 'Singlish', a local slang that fuses Chinese and Malay phrases with the English language. Much of the comedy and appeal of the film to the general public lay in hearing their normal speech recreated on screen.

But Eric Khoo's coup de grace came with *12 STOREYS* (1997), which was selected for the Cannes International Film Festival the same year. The film's social content, about the alienated lives of public housing dwellers, was a subtle criticism of sexual repression and displaced sexual desire. The central story (there are three in all) has a model Singaporean, a school teacher, bent on curbing the liberal lifestyle of his younger sister, the twist being that his attempts to control her have an unconscious incestuous motive.

The film did not ignite controversy, but its official selection for Cannes fuelled an unprecedented hysteria for Singapore movie-making. Two other films were also produced that year, Lim Suat Yen's *The Road Less Travelled* and Hugo Ng's *God or Dog*, the latter being a second film version of the crimes of the murderer Adrian Lim.

A Singapore producer, Andrew Yap, also invested in Australian director Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road*, which was partially shot here. And finally, the National Arts Council officially acknowledged film as an art form worthy of funding. The rapid swirl of events continued. In 1998, the Singapore Film Commission was inaugurated, with a mission to fund and support Singapore film. Up to this point, there had not been any government funding of films available.

Besides feature film funding, the Commission also allowed for co-productions, shorts, script development and even for educational funding, which included studies at an overseas film school. Each year a total of four features can be funded up to a sum of S\$250,000 per film. A fund for a total of 40 shorts annually has also been provided. So far, however, only one feature has been funded.

There were many new releases in 1998, and these included films such as *TEENAGE TEXTBOOK*, *LUCKY NUMBER* and *TIGER'S WHIP*. But two films stood out in terms of commercial success. They were *MONEY NO ENOUGH* (directed by Tay Teck Lock), and *FOREVER FEVER* (by Glen Goei). Whereas Khoo's *12 STOREYS* achieved critical acclaim, Jack Neo, a well-known TV comedian (who also acted in *12 STOREYS*) was responsible for the box-office success of Singapore film.

Neo scripted and acted in *MONEY NO ENOUGH* (1998), and its takings of S\$5.8 million resulted in it becoming the second biggest grossing film in Singapore after *Titanic*. *MONEY NO ENOUGH* defined the blueprint for box-office success (or that's what many producers thought) – comedy, use of dialect (previously forbidden in the media since 1979 when Singapore was promoting the usage of Mandarin) and TV stars.

The film was also a hit as it satirized dominant features of Singaporean life, such as Singapore's obsession with money, how government policies have a taxing effect on people's income and the lengths to which Singaporeans go to get a good deal.

Many film productions, for example, *LUCKY NUMBER* (1998) and *WHERE GOT PROBLEM* (1999), were quickly assembled to catch the fad before it faded. But Neo had honed his satirical wit on TV for many years. He was already a household name when he went for the Singapore jugular, bringing under scrutiny its obsession for money.

Meanwhile, Goei's *FOREVER FEVER* made a pile by having its world rights picked up by Miramax films. The film, which shows the heyday of disco in Singapore, reminds one of *Saturday Night Fever*, and features many of those hit songs. The film's charm works because of our nostalgia for the period, and it also uses dialect. Nevertheless, in look and feel, it still comes across as television on the big screen.

But success proved to be an untamed animal for Jack Neo. Khoo executive-produced Neo's next opus, *LIANG PO PO* (1999), a screen adaptation of one of his TV personas. It was reasonably successful but only made half the box-office figure of his first film.

LIANG PO PO also signaled the entry of the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) into feature production. The Corporation set up a subsidiary, Raintree Pictures, to produce four films each year. LIANG PO PO was its maiden voyage. To its credit, it created a media blitz so overpowering that Jack Neo's LIANG PO PO persona could be seen at every corner of Singapore.

But unexpectedly that created a public backlash for Neo. For his third film, THAT ONE NO ENOUGH (1999), Neo made his directorial debut (he had only scripted and acted in the earlier films), but it was also his first film to lose money. Ironically, it was also his most cohesive film, and its social satire, about philandering men, was an indirect nod to sex-crazed/repressed Singapore.

In many ways, the Singapore film in the 1990s dealt with Singapore obsessions – money (MONEY NO ENOUGH, LUCKY NUMBER), sex and repression (12 STOREYS, THAT ONE NO ENOUGH, FOREVER FEVER, TIGER'S WHIP, BUGIS STREET) and the fear of losing out on a good deal (LIANG PO PO, WHERE GOT PROBLEM) – in a more candid way than could be expressed on television. For instance, much of the sexual humor was expressed in dialect, which could not be shown on TV due to Singapore's campaign to speak more Mandarin as opposed to other Chinese dialects.

Unfortunately, owing to the phenomenal success of MONEY NO ENOUGH, many new films were rushed into production to take advantage of the film frenzy. Most of these came across as exploitative and copycat efforts and were box-office disasters. Even more unfortunate were the consequences of overproduction of poor quality films – they killed off the fervor that Singaporeans had for its emerging cinema, by creating a cynical response.

Later, when Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng's EATING AIR was released in late 1999, the film did not take off. It was a fine effort, fusing teenage romance with the kung-fu and youth gang genres. But the audiences by then were just wary of seeing another tiresome Singapore film. Had EATING AIR been released after 12 STOREYS, it would have built a more lasting momentum. Still, winning the SFC Young Cinema Award and a Special Mention from FIPRESCI (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique) at the Stockholm Film Festival vindicated it.

Today, there are 173 cinemas serving a population of three million, but movie-going has gone down from over 20 million annual admissions in the 1980s to a little over 16 million now. Yet, at the same time, it is a kind of a miracle that whereas in 1991, only one Singapore film was produced, in 1998, five films were made.

In 1999, five more films were released – THE TRUTH ABOUT JANE AND SAM, THAT ONE NO ENOUGH, WHERE GOT PROBLEM, STREET ANGELS and 2000 AD. The next year, two more films were released – STORIES ABOUT LOVE, Singapore's first digital feature executive produced by Eric Khoo and CHICKEN RICE WAR by Cheah Chee Kong. Both were dismal box-office failures. So far in 2001, two new films have been released – RETURN TO PONTIANAK and THE TREE.