

# **BUILDING A NEW MALAYSIAN NATIONAL CINEMA**

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## **Abstract**

The emergence of a new independent group of filmmakers led by Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Ho Yuhang and Yasmin Ahmad has brought a new cinema to Malaysia. Their films have won much accolades in the international arena but at home, they face difficulties in getting government support through funding and faces problems with censorship. This paper will look at these problems and discuss data extracted from in-depth interviews with Malaysian filmmakers. It will also look at how these new films are affecting the existing notions of what constitutes Malaysian cinema, and the new challenges that the existing film and funding policies face in building a 'new' national cinema.

## **Biodata**

Gregory Wee is a new full-time lecturer with the School of IT and Multimedia, Swinburne University of Technology (Sarawak Campus).

Previously, he was attached to the Cinematography Program, Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. He joined UNIMAS in 1995 and obtained his MA in Film from Northwestern University in Illinois, USA in 1997.

In UNIMAS, he served as Head/Coordinator of Cinematography Program from 1997-2003. In 2002, he organized the Sarawak Millennium Film Festival which was a platform for the new wave filmmaking community to discuss their common problems and to showcase their work from South East Asia.

Currently, Gregory is doing his research and PhD in film funding in the context of building a national cinema.

## Introduction

The history of Malaysian cinema has always been a history of Malay films, either produced by the Shaw Brothers' Studios during the Golden Era until the 70s, or by the Malay independent producers in the 3 decades that followed<sup>1</sup>. The stories have always been Malay-centric, in the Malay language, using Malay actors and directors, produced for the predominantly Malay audience. Lacking alternatives, audiences from the Indian and Chinese ethnicities would watch Bollywood, Hollywood and Hong Kong films which appeals more to their sensibilities.

Despite being a multicultural country, the Malaysian government, power and politics is in the hands of the Malay majority (over 50% of total population). Islam, the Malay language, culture and their *Bumiputera* (Sons of the Soil) status are therefore protected as part of their special rights and to qualify them for government assistance. Other indigenous groups such as Orang Asli from West Malaysia, and Ibans, Kadazans, etc. from East Malaysia have also been technically inducted into this category as non-Malay *Bumiputeras*. However, their culture and language do not play as large a role as the Malay counterpart. As for the Chinese and Indians, they still hold strongly to their rights to education in their own languages, and their beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Malay films have always been the sole representation of Malaysian cinema in the absence of films from the other ethnicities. Malay films in the Malay language have been taken as *Filem Kita*, *Wajah Kita* (literally translated as Our films, Our Faces). Thus a film with a proper story, with Malay actors speaking in the Malay language would fulfill the construct of a Malaysian film or more precisely, *filem Melayu*.

The terms *filem Melayu* and *sinema Melayu* have always been widely used as opposed to Malaysian films or Malaysian cinema. However, in the context of a multicultural nation, the use of these terms seem to suggest a sense of territorial claim and ownership which is still pervasively entrenched in the mindsets of the Malays, the 'primary' race.<sup>3</sup> This will become problematic for the new wave of independent filmmakers at the turn of the new millennium.

In addition to that, the film and funding policies of the old millennium which supported commercial filmmaking have become obsolete as it now needs to address the needs of a new breed of filmmakers.

## A Brief History of Malaysian Cinema

Malaysian films are generally Malay-centric, in Malay language, with Malay characters and narratives, and patronised by Malay audiences. Chinese and Indian audiences largely watch Hong Kong and Hollywood films. This has been the case ever since the independent era in the 1970s when filmmaking fell from the already defunct Shaw Brothers' control into the hands of Malay filmmakers who started their careers with Shaw like P. Ramlee, Aziz Satar and Jins Shamsuddin who continued with the melodramatic and comedic traditions of the Golden Era.

The 1980s brought about a new era of state support with the establishment of FINAS to regulate and assist the film industry. Notable films of that era include Jins

Shamsuddin's *Bukit Kepong* (1982), Rahim Razali's *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1983) and Othman Hafsham's *Mekanik* (1984), although not as successful as the slapstick comedies by Aziz Satar and A.R. Badul. This dual stream of serious films and commercial comedies continue to pervade the industry throughout the 1990s.

Adman Salleh, Mahadi J. Murat, Suhaimi Baba and Erma Fatimah made films with a "profound understanding of the tensions, frustrations and idiosyncrasies that lie beneath the surface of Malay society" (Hassan Muthalib, 2005)<sup>4</sup>. Of all these directors, only Suhaimi Baba has been able to traverse between art and commerce more successfully.

This era also witnessed the first RM6 million blockbuster hit *Sembilu II* (1995), a feat unbroken to this day. By simply rehashing old formulas of the bygone era, Yusof Haslam manages to churn out hit films with predictable plots, love tragedies, big bikes and popular singers as actors. All of his films are highly popular but are panned by critics.

Another consistent and commercially successful director worth noting is Aziz M. Osman who has been able to strike a balance between popularity and respect for his films. His films communicate well, with sensitive characterisations and have more well developed narratives - something which is generally lacking in Malay films.

The 1990s also saw the birth of a new kind of art cinema, one which was capable of attracting international attention and funding. U-Wei Haji Saari continues to make his own kind of alternative cinema which dares to defy social norms and thus courting controversy in almost all his films. In 1995, his film *Kaki Bakar* (The Arsonist, 1993) was screened in Cannes' *Un Certain Regard*. He continues to receive international funding for his films.

### **The Emergence of a New Problem: The New Independent Cinema**

In Malaysia as in other parts of Southeast Asia, the new millennium is marked by the digital technology revolution which has changed the face of communication, lifestyle, business and entertainment. Visual communication has become more convenient as the graphical interfaces and digital content become more easily accessible through the internet, mobile phones and today, the ipods. The new generation of youths are tech-savvy and they speak in new languages of video games, ICQ, SMS and MTV. Digital video cameras, animation, graphic and editing softwares become more commonplace, user-friendly and affordable. The mushrooming of multimedia courses are also equipping the younger generation with a new set of language and skills. Now it seems that everyone can make a film.

Ideologically, a new generation of young Malaysians, who has been schooled and taught with the concept of *muhibbah* (goodwill) and *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race), has come of age. This new generation is a product of the ex-Prime Minister Mahathir's vision for a united, multicultural identity mainly consisting of the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. Thus exists an awareness of multiculturalism in every aspect of Malaysian life, governance and politics. On the contrary, Malaysian politics remain a politics of segregated race and religion.

This fixation on multi-culturalism and race, together with the ease of filmmaking, resulted in the proliferation of independently made films<sup>5</sup> which carried either optimistic multi-cultured films such as in the films of Yasmin Ahmad and Teck Tan, or ethno-centric disaffection such as James Lee, Ho Yuhang and Deepak Kumaran Menon's. Williamson (2005) insinuates that the common theme of alienation and disaffection as a result of marginalisation in Malaysia runs in all the Chinese-centric indie films.

At this point in time, a new problem starts to surface. In the past, Malaysian cinema had always been Malay films only. How does one define a Malaysian cinema now? For pragmatic reasons, this definition is important as it qualifies a film to be eligible for state support in terms of loans, schemes and other assistance<sup>6</sup>. Films in any other language other than the official language of Bahasa Melayu is not considered a Malaysian film, and cannot qualify for the *Skim Wajib Tayang* (Compulsory Screening Scheme) and the Entertainment Tax Returns. However, even more importantly, a redefinition of Malaysian cinema to include locally made films in other languages would mean a change in the existing mindset to accommodate more openly for the 'other'. The question is, is Malaysia ready for the 'other'?

Ramani (2005) implies that some quarters feel that the 'national' representation is threatened by the 'heterogeneity and hybridisation of the nation portrayed in films.' A series of recent events illustrates this discomfort.

On April 23, 2006 Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) broadcasted a live forum programme called Fenomena Seni (Art Phenomena) which discussed two of Yasmin Ahmad's films *Sepet & Gubra*. The forum was entitled '*Sepet and Gubra – Corruptors of Malay Culture*' and hostile comments came from two of the guests (a film producer and an assistant entertainment editor of a local Malay daily) towards certain scenes portrayed in the films as unrealistic, unnecessary and corruptible to Malay culture<sup>7</sup>. Part of their disagreements were directed towards the taboo relationship between the Malay female character (Orked) and a Chinese boy (Jason) in the film. At the end of the forum, the Malay producer claimed that "Malaysia belonged to the Malays. That's why it was called Tanah Melayu before."<sup>8</sup>

This discomfort was again expressed in almost similar tone towards the film *Gubra* and the director Yasmin Ahmad by a few academicians in a discussion forum held by a public university in Malaysia later in the same year.<sup>9</sup>

Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2005)<sup>10</sup> and Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2002) explicitly addressed issues of race, culture and religion by exploring the inter-racial relationships between its main characters of different racial backgrounds. Thus the films used different ethnic languages such as Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and English to correctly capture a slice of real Malaysian life as opposed to a glossed-over version favoured by certain bureaucrats.

The situations that Yasmin puts her characters into, and the questions that arises from those situations seem to create a sense of insecurity in the social, cultural and political construct of Malayness. When *Sepet* and *Gubra* went on to win the Best Film Category in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Film Festival, there was dissent amongst individuals

from the film community and the Malay press about the eligibility of her film to qualify for the awards, and that her film was not Malaysian.

In a separate case, James Lee and Ho Yuhang's application for funds to transfer their digital video to film format in order to participate in an international film festival was partially rejected, 'on the ground that the quality is bad, because it's a video. Second[ly] because there's no *muhibbah* element of multi-cultural in the film... [The film is] all about Chinese. So [the application] was rejected based on that.'

Gaik (2005) summarises the reason for this situation very well:

'[The new indie filmmakers] encountered discrimination when dealing with state bodies that were ideological remnants of a Malay-centric NEP (National Economic Policy, 1971-1990) and National Cultural Policy. Such a policy emphasises assimilation to Malay language and culture rather than a practice of the politics of multiethnic inclusion. While many would deny that an intentional gatekeeping on the basis of race is occurring—since gatekeeping may also function due to ignorance and fear of those who may be more successful or have film school training compared to apprenticeships, the heated debate and discussions in the media and on the internet (weblogs, Malaysian-cinema@yahoogroups.com email discussion list and kakiseni website) illustrate the deep-rootedness of racialisation in Malaysian public discourse and our collective consciousness.' (Gaik, 2005)

### **Film Funding in Malaysia**

The Malaysian national budget for 2007, which was announced in September this year, includes a proposal for a Creative Industry Development Fund with an initial allocation of RM100 million. The fund will be used 'to promote the private sector's involvement' in the film industry and to encourage research in media content and creative arts. Another RM685 million will be allocated for the development and management of arts, cultural and heritage activities<sup>11</sup>.

The allocation of this substantial amount of funding is very encouraging for the local film industry which has not been growing for decades. It indicates that the government, through the efforts of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage, understands the importance of cultural arts and the potential of creative content in creating a burgeoning media industry. Since the 1970s, the national feature film output has always stayed below 20-25 films per year<sup>12</sup>. Last year was considered a relatively successful year with 20 films being released. Even so, this still places Malaysia behind most of its Southeast Asian neighbours like Thailand and the Philippines.

As with its other counterparts, Malaysia faces intense competition from Hollywood and Hong Kong films at the local box-office. The film business is shunned as a high-risk investment industry which lacks the appeal found in other larger film industries such as Bollywood or Hollywood, therefore failing to attract corporate investments and financial institutions.

The *Skim Wajib Tayang* (Compulsory Screening Scheme)<sup>13</sup> implemented by the National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) guarantees screenings for all Malaysian films for a minimum duration of one week. However, in most cases, the films themselves do not seem to attract enough audiences.

Producers and filmmakers in Malaysia have very limited access to film funding as commercial banks do not fund films. In Malaysia, there is only one bank that offers a special package for funding film production – *Bank Pembangunan* (The National Development Bank).

In the recent years, the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage initiated a new RM50 million fund to be administered by Bank Pembangunan. The previous fund initiated in 1996 has been more for TV production where a contract offer from the national broadcaster RTM will guarantee payment back to the bank. Now, the new revolving fund works the same way for film. The collateral is now an agreement from theatrical distributors to screen the film at hand, and from other channels like VCD distribution and television stations. The new fund has extended loans for television production to feature film. However, these funds tend to be favourable towards experienced producers with good commercial track records<sup>14</sup>.

### **The Other Problem: An Industry of Ambiguity and Uncertainty**

Filmmakers like Amir Muhammad, James Lee and Ho Yuhang started their own small, independently financed digital films without license, shooting permits nor state support. Their experiences with state funding and the censorship board<sup>15</sup> has left them exasperated as guidelines are vague and subjective, standards are volatile and inconsistent.

Of late, Amir Muhammad's battle with the authorities concerning the censorship of his film *The Last Communist* (2006) clearly illustrates an ambiguity and uncertainty that permeates Malaysian cinema. *The Last Communist* was screened for and approved by the censorship board. However, because of an article<sup>16</sup> in a Malay press which ignorantly charges the film to be glamourising the communists, pressure was mounted and finally the censorship board retracted the approval.

In addition to that, the processing of funding applications are inefficient, slow, not transparent, unprofessional and unfriendly.

The following is an experience shared by one of the new independent filmmakers when applying for a travel grant. The viewpoints expressed by the filmmaker typifies the usual negative perspectives one has on the available funding process and its accessibility.

“I never approach [the agency] for funding but I look at their criteria, and forms and bad things about it. But I think [it's] **not that encouraging** and even when we apply for travel funds, it's quite a **hassle**. You have to go there.....like nowhere. Buy 5 forms and then you have to call them every time to update you... their agency service film makers same thing like we are beggars and I found it not very healthy ... I would try not to apply anything ... because of the amount, hassle and all this. People who work [there don't] really know what they doing. I mean like, it takes four months to actually process the travel grant of \$2000 and at the end it's rejected. It's ... not progressive in term of time... Let's say I'm doing business but for business deal with 2k, [taking] 4 months, we are losing a lot of time and money. So they are **not**

**effective.** If they were business, they bankrupt long time ago. So... that's what I think of [the agency] at the moment. I only apply when it's really necessary..."

Another filmmaker gave the following comments when asked what can help improve funding opportunities in Malaysia:

"I think greater **efficiency** and **transparency**, that's all. Everything just falling into two concepts. It's **no point creating a lot of rules** and if people who are in charge know what the rules are, [the filmmakers will be] more interested, more motivated [to apply]. Look at the way the Singapore film commission does things. It's very efficient. And even at the website you can apply. And they tell you no matter what the application is, in four weeks you will know the answer and whether you are eligible for this type of funding. And [for] each type of funding, what's the ceiling you can ask for, and what you have to apply instead. You go there and [they will] give you a sitting ... And then they will call you and you have to comeback [a] few more [times]. So it's [more of a matter of] **professionalism** .. I think. So **not more rules**, definitely not. But just **people who know how the system work**.

The same filmmaker continues to suggest a possible solution:

"I think it will be the mixture of different types of funding. You need **grants** which means no profit. I mean money just given with no possibility of financial return. But the **return is in skills training and in exposure**. You need that. And you also need the loans through the bigger films which have higher chances of getting their money back. And because a lot of money is made from foreign films [through taxes] and so that over the years made a huge amount of money made from foreign films. And it's appropriate to use that to channel that back into local films. Which is being done in Korea and.... Canada, Australia ... That's how they kick started their film industry. It not taking money out of nowhere, taking money out of money that was made from film anyway."

The selected comments<sup>17</sup> presented here enable us to catch a glimpse of the problems faced by these young filmmakers. They are by no means exhaustive. The comments represent their limited personal perspectives which are validated by their own personal experiences. However, they help raise our attention to the important questions and concerns at the very least.

The new Malaysian cinema needs the support of an effective system of funding and grants that do not only assist commercial films but also allow young filmmakers to explore new themes and content, and these will indirectly become training opportunities for them to polish their production skills. These funds and grants should be made easily accessible to them through procedures which are more efficient, standardized and transparent.

Nevertheless, these problems have prompted the Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim to put pressure on the Censorship Board to take a softer stance as it was "killing the local film industry", and has announced plans for the revamping of FINAS into a more efficient and transparent agency by "stepping up its activities to be more market-driven, more approachable and proactive."<sup>18</sup>

Disaffected and alienated for now, these young filmmakers have since focused on international festivals, winning much recognition and awards. In the meantime, their

films are being funded by European grants from Hubert Bals Foundation (Rotterdam) and Jan Vrijman Fund (Amsterdam), while we sort things out in Malaysia on who, how and what films to fund.

### **The Final Problem: Malay or Malaysian Cinema?**

As discussed earlier, the emergence of the new independent cinema raises questions on what constitutes Malaysian cinema. Malaysian cinema has always been synonymous with Malay films<sup>19</sup> which have sometimes been taken to uphold the sovereignty of the Malay race, language and culture.

The emergence of the new films which focused on the 'other' than the Malays seem to throw the status quo into imbalance. The simple definition of national cinema before has now become complicated. Immediately, this creates problems as the new cinema of cultural diversity can no longer fit into this narrow perception of national Malay cinema.

Films are a reflection of culture, and in Malaysia it is one which is diverse. A true Malaysian picture can only be described when the other ethnic races are represented. This does not mean that every film made must have representations of this diversity. Instead, it means that every componential ethnic group should be allowed to express its own culture that contributes to the total whole of the meaning of being Malaysian.

The main ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians form just the surface of the matter. There is also a need to encourage films and stories from the *Orang Asli* aborigines, as well as the various indigenous groups from the Borneo island in East Malaysia. The thriving Iban music and VCD movie production industry which started in the late 1990s in Sarawak illustrates the need for such cultural expressions. Although the production standards are very basic, it gives these ethnic groups a voice and opportunity to participate in the process of nation building, as opposed to being just the subject of an exotic ethnographic documentary.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, there is a misconception of 'national cinema' to be prescriptive (prescribing what it is supposed to be) rather than descriptive (describing what is already there) (Higson, 2002). Thus, the term 'national cinema' should not be used to refer to a set of requirements that must be full-filled by a film to be considered as part of national cinema.

Therefore, 'national cinema' in this paper proposes the collection of culturally diverse films which are available that gives a collective picture of the cinema in a particular country, thus illustrating the rich and diverse components of its culture. This is similar to Britain's search for its own identity and culture<sup>20</sup>. Cooke (2001) suggests that 'for the UK, a national cinema needs to be a pluralistic cinema, reflecting British cultures and British identities in their diversity, rather than conforming to an idea of national cinema that is uniform and nationalistic.' Ramani (2005) questions 'whether it is the job of cinema to participate in the construction of "national identity", or to read

representations of intercultural and inter-religious relationships as a response to the nation's concerns about multiculturalism and national integration.'

It is important to be aware that a 'national cinema' has the tendency to marginalise other social communities to become a singular, hegemonic 'national' identity. Thus, the redefinition of national cinema should not be one of exclusivity but one that is as widely and variedly inclusive as possible. This notion needs to be considered when formulating new film and funding policies which require more efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and professionalism in its implementation and administration.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Muthalib (2005) recounts Dr Anuar Nor Arai's 5 voices of Malaysian cinema to give an overview of the developments in the Malaysian cinema.

<sup>2</sup> Learn about Malaysia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysia>. For a deeper understanding of race, economy and politics in Malaysia, read Fenton (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Dr Farish Noor provides an insightful look into the lost Malay identity and the reasons for their defensiveness at <http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/people/MDA5Mg.html> *Malaysians are robbed of their past: an interview with Dr. Farish A Noor*

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<sup>4</sup> Hassan Muthalib (2005) recounts Dr Anuar Nor Arai's 5 voices of Malaysian cinema. *Voices of Malaysian Cinema*. <http://www.criticine.com>

<sup>5</sup> Gaik (2005) describes the conditions for the emergence of this alternative cinema and how they operate.

<sup>6</sup> Gaik (2005): 'indie filmmakers whose films secure local cinema screenings may realise their films are not "truly Malaysian" after all when they are later denied the incentive aid (to recover the entertainment duty they have to pay upfront) on the basis that their film is not a "local film" because it is not in Bahasa Malaysia (this policy is under review now).'

<sup>7</sup> Read Yasmin's reactions to these attacks at <http://yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com/2006/>

<sup>8</sup> Read more about the forum in the article *One reality to rule us all* written by Jacqueline Ann Surin for the Sun (Thu, 23 Nov 2006) at <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=14019>

<sup>9</sup> The forum entitled "Film as Ar-Risalah: Viewpoints on Gubra, Does it Qualify to Win the 19<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Film Festival's Best Film Award?" was held at Universiti Malaya on September 1, 2006. Four of the panelists agreed that the film demeaned Malay race and the Islamic religion.

<sup>10</sup> For more details about the film, read Williamson's (2005) review on *Sepet*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bernama.com.my>

<sup>12</sup> The official FINAS website at <http://www.finas.gov.my> offers detailed statistics on local film output, and box office performances

<sup>13</sup> Details of schemes are available at <http://www.finas.gov.my>

<sup>14</sup> This information is based on an in-depth interview with Bank Pembangunan.

<sup>15</sup> Read Eng Poh Si's article *Sniper Happy Censorship Board* at <http://www.thecicak.com>

<sup>16</sup> The actual article *The Last Communist Film for Malaysian Citizens?* (Berita Harian May 4, 2006) by Akmal Abdullah can be found at <http://lastcommunist.blogspot.com/>

<sup>17</sup> The comments are part of the data collected by the author through in-depth interviews with the new wave Malaysian filmmakers

<sup>18</sup> Read the article at <http://www.thesundaily.com/article.cfm?id=8261> *No business like show business* by Jacqueline Ann Surin (April 1, 2005)

<sup>19</sup> See Gaik's (2005) article for an interesting overview on race in the new Malaysian independent cinema. *Art, Entertainment and Politics* at <http://www.criticine.com>

<sup>20</sup> See Cooke. Britain's cultural identity has been pluralistic since the 1960s and further fragmented by the multiplicity of Irish, Welsh and Scottish nationalism.