# Beyond the Screen: Transnational Flows in Early Southeast Asian Cinemas

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**ABSTRACT**

National cinemas in Southeast Asia did not appear in isolation. The emergence and development of national cinemas across the region were facilitated by key transnational connections and influences. This article explores three transnational factors that helped pave the way for the emergence of the national cinemas in postcolonial Southeast Asia. Travelling across borders to collaborate with one another, Southeast Asian filmmakers shared their ideas, filmmaking techniques, and political ideals. Hollywood productions also influenced their craft. All these ideas and influences would find their way into the films they created. Facilitating the transnational exchange and productions were the ethnic Chinese who funded numerous films that later served as an impetus for the local filmmaking industry. Through these transnational exchanges, collaborations, and financial support, the post-war Southeast Asian film industries became notably vibrant and popular with the local population. The locals would embrace the films as valuable entertainment products and as significant parts of their social and cultural lives. The article further argues that these transnational linkages reinforced the notion of Southeast Asia as a coherent region as it was formally institutionalised in 1967 with the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

**Keywords:** Hollywood, national cinema, Southeast Asian Cinemas, transnational history

# INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalised world, the notion of national cinema does not fully capture the dynamics and interconnections in film production, circulation, and consumption. This article looks into the vibrant cinematic exchange within Southeast Asia, where Southeast Asian filmmakers, producers, and actors engaged in dialogue with each other, forming cultural as well as political networks. Focusing on the cases of the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya/Malaysia, it highlights the interconnectedness of national cinemas in Southeast Asia. Through this, it pushes the scope of the history of national cinemas in the region by exploring the transnational exchanges and linkages in national cinemas from the end of the Second World War up until the establishment of Southeast Asia as a coherent region in 1967.

While the technology underpinning modern cinemas was of European origins, it is imperative to deepen and complicate our understanding of the development of Southeast Asian national cinemas in relation to nation-building, decolonisation, and regionalism. To date, there has been a tremendous production of academic publications exploring Southeast Asian cinemas (Gaik, Barker, and Ainslie 2020; Sim 2020; Baumgärtel 2012; Lim and Yamamoto 2011) from a myriad of approaches. The themes of these publications include the history and development of national cinemas, the rise of independent films and filmmaking in the region, and critical and aesthetic appraisal of Southeast Asian films and genres, to name a few. While most of these works tend to focus on the nation as a framework and method of analysis, in recent years, prominent film scholars have explored the concept of transnational cinemas (Tolentino 2014; Taylor 2011; Barker and Imanjaya 2020; Durovičová and Newman 2009). To be sure, transnationalism is not a novel approach and it has had a huge impact in various fields, such as literature, political science, and film studies. In the field of history, transnational refers to "complex linkages, networks, and actors… its central concern [is] with movements, flows, and circulation" (Hofmeyer 2006).

Foregrounding Southeast Asia, I offer a historical investigation of the facets of transnationalism in Southeast Asian cinemas following the Second World War. This article argues that the climate of post-war Southeast Asia amidst decolonisation and Cold War contestation paved the way for Southeast Asian filmmakers to explore collaborations and co-productions. I identify three transnational flows that influenced the development and transformation of national cinemas in the region. The first link to be examined is the transnational role of ethnic Chinese businessmen and immigrants in instilling non-Western cinematic roots in Southeast Asia. They provided capital and financial resources to filmmakers, imported films from China, and were responsible for a lot of technical, aesthetic, and stylistic transference. More importantly, they conjured an alternative (i.e. non-Western) lens of viewing or portraying Southeast Asia and its people – an alternative perspective that would then influence and shape Southeast Asian national cinemas. Second, the local filmmakers and producers formed an informal network of technology, people, and ideas that further invigorated the maturation of national

cinemas. These transnational collaborations were made easy by the region's collective historical, social, and cultural attributes. Finally, Hollywood, a global cinematic force, impacted the region as a whole. Hollywood flooded the market and gained unprecedented popularity in the region. It influenced the cinematic apparatus, material productions, business-model, techniques, as well ideologies of Southeast Asian cinemas. As perhaps the most enduring transnational linkage in the region, Hollywood infiltrated the region in so many levels and ways, inciting perceptible, albeit varied, responses from Southeast Asian societies.

Focusing on three countries – the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya/Malaysia, this article argues that the emergence of national cinemas in Southeast Asia was a transnational process. These three cases are selected on account of their vibrant film industries in the post-war era and their key role in the nascent regional politics and formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. I further argue that films from these three countries laid out the foundations of the idea of regionalism or regional identity among Southeast Asians. The writers of the film (and indeed, political) scripts came from different states across the region. They formed transnational networks, exchanging ideas, and influencing one another. The products of those transnational exchanges were films that moved the people of Southeast Asia to imagine not only what their respective nations were like but what lay beyond their borders and to develop a sense of affinity with the histories and cultures of their neighbouring countries.

## STRONG CHINESE LINKS

The ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs played key roles in the development of the film industry in the region. They started and managed many of the earliest studios and film companies that produced and screened local films. Growing the film industry in Southeast Asia, they produced films that stirred the imaginations of peoples about their countries and neighbours. Developing a transnational network of relations among the peoples in the film industry in Southeast Asia, they also facilitated the exchange of technology, ideas, and cinematic narratives among interested parties in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya/Malaysia. In other words, the ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs facilitated the development of cinema in the region at two levels: national (cinema industry and the national construct) as well as transnational (regional cinematic web and regionalism or a sense of regional identity). Trained in countries like the United States, the ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs saw the film industry as one sector of the economy that could potentially reap significant financial gains. But they also entertained certain ideas about Southeast Asian localities and the broader region. They produced films that reflected their ideas about the emerging Southeast Asian nations, the peoples, the cultures, and the heterogeneity of the region.

The ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs were key actors in Indonesia's nascent cinema industry. Aside from Oriental Film, which produced *Kris Mataram* (1940), Chinese businessmen owned other prominent film companies: Wong Brothers established in Bandung in 1928, the Tan Films opened in 1929 by Tan Khoen Hian, and in 1931, the Cino Motion Picture Corporation was opened by The Tend Chun in Batavia (Amri 1988). They are credited for being among the pioneers of Indonesian cinema (apart from Western companies), producing the first feature films in the country. Their movies included *Melatie van Java* (Jasmine of Java, 1928), *Njai Dasima* (Mistress Dasima, 1929), *Nancy Bikin Pembelasan* (Nancy Seeks Revenge, 1930), *Melatie van Agam* (Melatie of Agam, 1930), *Impian di Bali* (Dreams in Bali, 1939), *Zoebaidah* (1940), and *Kris Mataram* (Mataram Keris, 1940). Ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs and producers also collaborated among themselves and with European filmmakers to produce films. *Terang Boelan* (Full Moon, 1937), for example, bore the imprimatur of Dutch filmmakers Albert Balink and Mannus Franken, and the Wong brothers Othniel and Joshua (Heider 1991, 15-16; Ruppin 2016, 215-262).

Employing the Shanghai film style, techniques used by Hollywood filmmakers, and local traditional theatre narrative practices, these films acquainted Indonesians with the lives and aspirations of the ethnic Chinese community as well as their identification with Indonesia. Njoo Cheong Seng's film *Kris Mataram*, for example, features scenes about East Indies society. Instead of portraying it as being associated exclusively with one cultural group in Indonesia, Njoo used the big screen to show it was cosmopolitan and linked to different cultures. The film's lead actress was also ethnic Chinese and wore traditional Javanese attire. To convey its message of inclusivity and promote the film, Njoo further employed publicity posters worded in both Dutch and Malay (Setijadi and Barker 2010, 30). In other words, Njoo's work effectively propounded the idea of an Indonesia that was culturally multi-coloured but also distinctly Indonesian. Similarly, this can be seen in *Terang Boelan*, another work produced by the Chinese filmmakers that contributed to the 'Indonesianization' of films in the East Indies (van der Heide 2002, 128). As Heider argues, after watching the film, audiences would have left the cinemas with the vivid notion of Indonesia as a complex but viable nation made up of multiple cultures (1991, 162-173). The filmmakers, in sum, promoted an image of Indonesia "that is complex, idiosyncratic, and unique, yet connected to global flows and modern practices… such an image of Indonesia is different from later insular indigenist imaginings of Indonesian belonging" (Setijadi and Barker 2010, 27). Their film techniques, styles, and narratives brought new understandings of the Indonesian nation onto the big screen and into the public consciousness.

It is also important to note that these early productions were, in fact, circulated across the colonial borders. *Kris Maratam* and *Terang Boelan* were screened in Singapore. The latter has scenes filmed in Singapore as well (Sunday Tribune, December 5, 1937). In an advertisement, *Kris Mataram* was described as "new Malay Musical" (The Straits Times, March 24, 1941) and continued to be screened at least twice at the Garrick Theatre in Geylang in April 1941 (The Straits Times, April 5, 1941). The

actors and actresses of these films also visited Singapore. In 1951, Fifi Young was one of the Indonesian artists who attended a musical show and fashion parade held at the Happy World Covered Stadium. Other Indonesia stars included the beauty queen Maria Manado, and Riboet Rawit, then a 22-year-old Sudanese singer and actress (Singapore Standard, November 21, 1950). *Terang Boelan* was equally popular and deemed as "an ideal entertainment for Malays and other Muslims to celebrate the Hari Raya festival" with a "universal appeal" (Singapore Free Press, December 6., 1937).

When ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs were active in the Indonesian film industry, they also invested in and keenly developed the Malayan and Singaporean film business. The principal film enterprises were the Shaw Brothers and the Cathay-Keris. The Shaw Brothers, Tan Sri Runme, and Sri Runrun arrived in Singapore from Shanghai and established the Hai Seng Company. They were initially focused on distributing films in Singapore and Malaya. They then turned to making them. In 1937, the Shaws bought second-hand film production equipment from Hong Kong and began producing films. Among their early creations was *Ibu Tiri* (The-Step Mother), released in 1937. Seeing much economic potential in the business, the Shaw Brothers expanded their film empire in the region. They built amusement parks and theatres and operated over a hundred movie houses across Southeast Asia (Barnard 2008). They established the Capitol Theater and constructed a studio in Singapore, hoping to use it to produce Malay and Cantonese films. To appeal to the local audience, the Malay works featured prominent Malay and Indonesian artists, such as Haron and Tina. These films were undoubtedly popular. Following the end of the Second World War, the Shaw Brothers decided to expand their operations and meet the heightened demand for entertainment. In 1949, the company's Malay film department became the Malay Film Productions. Through this new set-up, the studio made films in the region, and even brought filmmakers from the Philippines, Malaya, and Indonesia together to create the earliest transnational film productions. This will be further elaborated in the succeeding section. Suffice to note that the Shaw Brothers contributed to the establishment of a transnational network of filmmakers that would churn out productions that shaped the peoples' attitudes toward the region and the world.

Like the Shaw Brothers, Cathay Organization was another prominent ethnic Chinese film company that was influential in shaping the cinematic narratives in the region. Formerly known as Associated Theatres, the company was established by Lim Cheng Kim (wife of Loke Yew) and her son, Loke Wan Tho. Loke Yew, the patriarch, was born in Guandong, China, to a simple farming family. In 1858, he travelled to Malaya to look for better opportunities. For several years, he worked in a provisions shop. He built up his savings and was eventually able to open his own store. Loke also explored opportunities in the Malayan peninsula and invested in the tin mines of Perak. In due course, the entrepreneurial Loke Yew managed to expand his commercial ventures, diversifying into the liquor, real estate, and transportation businesses. His fourth wife, Lim Cheng Kim (born and raised in Malaya), and son, Loke Wan Tho, drew upon the large financial war chest that he built to start the Associated Theatres Ltd. in 1935 (Basri and Alauddin 1995, 58-73; Sen 2006, 171-184).

The Lokes opened numerous cinema houses in Singapore and Malaya. In August 1941, the company finally completed the construction of the 14-floor Cathay Building along Handy Road, the tallest structure in Singapore. Construction of the building had incidentally begun in 1937, and its cinema was opened to the public in 1939. At that time, the Cathay Building boasted a 1,300-seater cinema lined with armchairs. It also had air-conditioning. The first movie the cinema screened was Zoltan Korda's *The Four Feathers*. It attracted a sizeable crowd, which included prominent guests, such as the Colonial Secretary Sir Alexander Small and Lady Small. While the Cathay Building consistently drew large crowds until the war, the Lokes continued to expand their business. They developed an extensive network of cinema houses in the region and led the way in producing Malay and Mandarin films. They even employed mobile film vehicles to bring cinematic productions to far-flung villages and rural areas. Cathay Organization played a vital role in developing the cinema and entertainment industries of Singapore and Malaya and, to a certain extent, the entire region (Muthalib 2013; Sen 1985, 1-55).

If ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs helped develop the film industry in Malaya and Singapore, they also played significant roles in the Philippines. The pioneering group of businessmen, apart from the Spaniards and other Europeans, who invested in making films, included *chinos cristianos* (Chinese Christians). Among them were the Palanca and Leongson clans. These Chinese Christians, who were mainly businessmen, had reportedly been in the movie business before Jose Nepomuceno, the more famous "founder" of Filipino cinema, started his operations and released his first feature film (Deocampo 2003, 237-238; Musser 2017).

Nepomuceno released *Dalagang Bukid* (Country Maiden) in 1919 featuring Atang de la Rama. The locally produced silent film garnered significant attention and generated a lot of ticket sales. Yet another equally laudable work, *La Conquista Filipinas* (The Conquest of the Philippines) had been released seven years earlier by Edward Meyer Gross's Rizalina Film Manufacturing Company. Backing Gross were ethnic Chinese businessmen in the Philippines (Deocampo 2003, 239-242). Gross was an American businessman who decided to move into the Filipino film industry in the early 1910s. He ostensibly had help from key individuals in the Philippines – those who were familiar with the country's history – in crafting *La Conquista Filipinas*' screenplay. The film's storyline explores the ancient history of the Philippines prior to Spanish colonisation. It also narrates the early years of contact between the colonised and the colonisers. Other works released by the Rizalina Film Manufacturing Company, such as *La Vida Rizal* (The Life of Rizal, 1912), *Noli Me Tangere* (Touch Me Not, 1915), and *El Filibusterismo* (The Reign of Greed, 1916), similarly deal with local and nationalist themes, or historical subjects, such as the revolution against Spain and the Filipino martyr Dr. Jose Rizal. Apart from local experts, such films undoubtedly had the imprimatur of Filipino business people and government officials. Reflecting local production practices, the movies featured these businessmen and officials playing bit parts (Deocampo 2003, 239-242).

As an American who had only recently settled in the country, Gross would therefore have had assistance from the locals, including ethnic Chinese partners, in producing the films. A well-known ethnic Chinese businessman had, in fact, funded the production of *La Conquista*. Born in Xiamen, Don Carlos Palanca had moved to the Philippines in 1869 to look for better opportunities. Like Loke Yew, Palanca started his new life in Southeast Asia as a humble shop assistant. Tagged as "Manila's Noted Chinaman" (The Lincoln Sentinel, April 24, 1902), he worked diligently, accumulated enough funds to open up his own merchandise shop, progressively expanded his businesses, and eventually made his fortune. Among his many economic interests was the film industry and agreed to fund the production of *La Conquista* (Deocampo 2003, 239-242; Carpenter 1900). Palanca's financial support to Gross, though, was neither exceptional nor incomprehensible. Many ethnic Chinese who had acquired wealth and built their investments in the Philippines also financed the film industry. They included Don Francisco Lichauco, Don Francisco Leongson, Don Jose Tiotoco, and Don Jose Lauchengco. The returns could be handsome as movies were popular forms of entertainment in the country. Given their endeavours in the film industry, the ethnic Chinese magnates certainly had significant sway over popular entertainment and public perception of issues in the Philippines. As a scholar notes, one should not neglect "the role that the *chinos cristianos* (Chinese Christians) played in the cultural affairs of the emerging nation" (Deocampo 2003, 242-245; Carpenter 1900).

Apart from funding the production of films, the ethnic Chinese community also built theatres in the Philippines. In 1915, the Yu Uy Tong Clan Association erected one of the very first theatres in Binondo. This establishment eventually came to be known as the Rex Theatre. Another Chinese-owned movie house was the Asia Theatre Building. It was controlled by Vicente Gotamco. Born in Amoy in 1875, Gotamco came to the Philippines in 1885 to seek a better life. He made money, but lost most of his investments in a fire after the Filipino-American war. He rebuilt his businesses again, establishing a lumber company and acquiring large tracts of land in Pasay, a suburb of Manila. Gotamco also went into the film industry. At the Chinese-owned Asia Theatre Building and Rex Theatre, numerous Chinese and Hollywood movies would be screened (Taylor 2013, 1588-1621). Ultimately, like Indonesia and Malaya, the ethnic Chinese community in the Philippines was one key actor that helped develop the country's film industry.

Although ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs featured prominently in the movie business across Southeast Asia, they did not pompously compel the scriptwriters and actors to overtly advance political messages in their cinematic works. They could not, for example, openly call for the British imperialists to be violently booted out of Malaya. They would have been incarcerated (Muthalib 2013, 1-38). Yet their films reflected the societies of their times, and these societies were evidently ripe for reform and change. Putting images and generating narratives of racially-stratified societies on the silver screen would have invariably provoked reactions. Ethnic Chinese filmmakers and producers thus participated,

whether consciously or not, in the process of creating images and meanings of the nation. They would eventually rouse the local imagination.

The substantial Chinese investment and involvement, then, facilitated the development and growth of film enterprise in the region. Prior to the increased participation of other Southeast Asians in film production, the ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs had helped fund and build the infrastructure and facilities for a dynamic network of national cinemas. They further contributed to developing the moviegoing culture in Southeast Asia, offering movies in the local languages. Their involvement prevented the industry from being dominated by Western entrepreneurs and European-produced films. The ethnic Chinese business people enabled Southeast Asia's film industry to develop its unique identity. As one of the first groups of non-Western film producers in the region, these ethnic Chinese managed to assemble the initial bits and pieces – fragments of what eventually would underpin the development of a distinct Southeast Asian political and strategic culture.

## CO-PRODUCTIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL DISTRIBUTIONS

The Southeast Asian film industry that the ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs helped build saw much transnational collaboration and exchange of ideas. The mobility and exchange of cultures, ideas, and filmmaking technology in Southeast Asia generated cultural products that people across the region could relate to. The interconnection and interaction among Southeast Asian filmmakers and producers after World War II were dynamic. A number of outstanding films were made through co-productions among pioneering Southeast Asian filmmakers. Film distribution also expanded beyond national borders. Films from the Philippines made their way to Malaya and Indonesia. Cinematic productions from Malaya crossed easily to Indonesia and the Philippines. As the European empires retreated, intra-regional collaboration in film production and circulation intensified. Through these transnational associations, national cinemas progressively became transnational cinemas, producing films that resonated with audiences across national territorial borders.

The filmic collaborations in post-war Southeast Asia generated enthralling movies that illustrate the physiognomies and nature of cultural and social interaction within the region. These co-productions pervaded all levels of film making and brought together Southeast Asia directors, producers, technicians, cameramen, and actors to work on films. The filmmakers also circulated the films intra-regionally (Barnard 2009, 65-86). In a microcosm, the Malayan case was quite telling. Malaya was a highly fragmented and plural society, divided along ethnic lines, but as Timothy Barnard points out,

> [a]s film was a new form of expression in the region, the Shaw Brothers, Chinese migrants from Shanghai, hired Indian film directors to oversee the nascent industry. These Indian directors – mostly from India, although few has grown up in

> Malaya – wrote screenplays based on tales from their homeland, and used actors from *bangsawan…* to perform on-screen. This pattern – of Chinese owners, Malay *bangsawan*-based actors, and Indian writers and producers, which also reinforced stereotypes of the labour profiles of the region – held true for the period from 1947 until around 1955 at the two major studios.

The movement and screening of these films across national borders helped connect communities culturally and bring forth a nascent sense of regionalism among the peoples of Southeast Asia. Malayans, Filipinos, and Indonesians learnt more about each other. Finding common ground in their decolonisation experiences, they also consumed cinematic productions that revealed the socioeconomic and political aspirations of their fellow Southeast Asian citizens.

One of the foremost examples of these transnational cinematic productions in Southeast Asia is a work that resulted from the collaboration between Lamberto Avellana, a pioneering Filipino director, and P. Ramlee, who is known as a great actor, composer, director, and singer in Malaysian film history. *Sergeant Hassan* is one of most memorable films of post-war Malaysia and, by extension, of Southeast Asia. It is also a good case to examine transnational production in the region not only because it was made by two pioneers of Southeast Asian national cinemas but also because it portrayed nationalist sentiment at the peak of decolonisation and the Cold War.

The film was set at the height of the Japanese invasion of Malaya and explores the story of a simple orphan turned soldier during the war. Hassan's parents died when he was young. His father's friend subsequently adopted him. Embittered by the attention that was lavished on Hassan, the latter's foster brother, Aziz, bullied him. As grownups, Aziz continues to hate Hassan because Salmah, a woman he likes, fancies Hassan instead of him. With the outbreak of war, the Royal Malay Regiment calls for volunteers. Aziz joins but Hassan is forced to stay at home to manage the land owned by his foster father. As a result, he is labelled a coward by the townsfolk. Hassan decides to leave and join the regiment and is soon promoted to Sergeant. Hassan proves to be a good and brave fighter and even saves Aziz when he is captured by the Japanese.

The film was screened in Malaya in 1958 – only one year following the granting of independence by the British. It has subtitles mainly in English and Malay and was supported by the Royal Malay Regiment (Singapore Free Press, August 30, 1958). The memory of negotiations, limbo, and tension was very much present and alive in the minds not only the Malayans themselves but of their neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia. While the Philippines was granted independence in 1946, Indonesia declared sovereignty in 1947. The founding political leaders of Malaya led by Tunku Abdul Rahman were surveying for ways on how to build the country, navigate international relations, and design the internal institutions and framework of the newly independent

state. In the broader social and cultural context, the period corresponds to the comprehensive process of decolonisation – moving away from the grip of their former colonisers. The very same trend was apparent in the Philippines and Indonesia.

The entire film captures the dilemma of ordinary citizens at the height of the Japanese occupation. It puts the narratives of resistance at the forefront of its filmic message. It argues for the awakening of Malay/Malaysian nationalist fervour. At a significant juncture in the film, the main character, Hassan, bravely proclaims: "*Memang bangsa kita masih muda dan masih lemah. Aku tak peduli ito semua. Harapanku hanyalah kita sama bangsa bersatu-padulah hendaknya."* ["Even though we are still a young and new nation, I do not care. I hope we can all rise together."] (Ramlee and Avellana 1958). Clearly, the film recognises the state of the Malay nation – its vulnerabilities at a stage of decolonisation and its efforts of coming to terms not merely with the Japanese occupation but more importantly with British hegemony. Further, it envisioned the growth of a young yet sturdy nation and despite the strong presence of the Malay – as a race and group, as epitomised by the hero himself, P. Ramlee – it also incorporated other ethnic groups through key characters such as a Chinese person who assists Hassan during the skirmishes.

It is also salient to underscore that this film produced through collaboration and cooperation between a Filipino and Malay filmmaker not only indicates the transnational relationship between the two countries' budding film industries. It also reflects their shared history and experience under the Japanese occupation. In this respect, the film represents a shared vision – a common imagination within Southeast Asia forged through the region's experience under Japanese rule. As in the film, the war disrupted the life of ordinary citizens in the region. While some Filipinos and Malays fought fiercely against the Japanese, as in the film, some also worked with the Japanese and facilitated their occupation. The production of *Sergeant Hassan* exemplified a collective desire to depict the memories of the war and the possibilities of moving forward. The transnational production of *Sergeant Hassan* established the continuity of a narrative that crossed national imaginaries and subjectivities. Both Lamberto Avellana, as a Filipino director, and P. Ramlee, a Malay/Malaysian popular icon, comprehended the quintessence of the film and through their shared experiences produced a single and cohesive narrative that traversed national borders. In this respect, the division that separated the 'Filipino' from his 'Malay/Malaysian' counterpart ceased to exist. What surfaced, then, was an amalgam of their common histories under foreign rule and a shared vision of coming to terms with their colonial past.

More importantly, the main character, Hassan ceases to be a Malay soldier – he becomes a hybrid persona who can easily be recognised by Southeast Asians. In other words, the film is an early Southeast Asian attempt to paint recognisable images of Southeast Asians. According to Malaysian film scholars, *Sergeant Hassan* remains a symbol of Malay production at the height of the studio era in

the country. Malays identified with the Filipino who directed the film, since both societies had undergone colonisation, and understood the broad cultural and historical landscape of Southeast Asia. This then indicates a coalescing of the prevailing subjectivities shared by the societies in the region (Lacaba 2000, 52; Muthalib and Cheong 2002, 304-306).

Films such as *Sergeant Hassan* created the opportunities for Southeast Asians to imagine not just the nation but also the cooperative region. By the 1950s, more transnational co-productions had transpired. Filipino directors travelled to Malaya and collaborated with local filmmakers. Their joint works resulted in transnational and hybrid narratives and styles that resonated with Filipinos, Malayans, and even Indonesians. Familiar with Malay culture and language, Filipinos cooperated easily and fruitfully with the Malayans. They also helped their counterparts to develop new shooting and lighting techniques – skills that the Filipinos acquired from Americans (Heide 2002, 136). The end result were films that connected with and inspired the peoples of the region.

Aside from Lamberto Avellana, other Filipinos also gained prominence in Malaya's and Singapore's cinema industries. Three of the most important Filipino filmmakers who operated in Malaya were Eddie Infante, Teodorico C. Santos, and Ramon Estella. In 1955, Infante worked for the Shaw Brothers and created the film *Gadis Liar* (Girl of the Wild, 1955). The work effectively bridged the cultures of Southeast Asia and promoted especially the sense of affinity between Filipinos and Malayans. *Gadis Liar* effectively accentuated "the cultural similarities between Malay kampong life and the world of the Muslims in the southern Philippines." The rituals, norms, and social fibre of Malayan communities certainly resembled those practiced and developed among the Muslim communities in the Philippines (Heide 2002, 127). By bringing those practices onto the big screen, *Gadis Liar* helped lodge onto the consciousness of those who watched the film that peoples in the region shared similar cultural practices and traits.

Teodorico C. Santos only made one movie, entitled *Taufan* (Typhoon, 1957), with the company. He arrived in Singapore in August 1957 and mentioned that "His firm was looking forward to producing a series of Malay-Filipino films in Malaya in the near future" (The Straits Times August 8, 1957, 5). Famous Malayan actors Ahmad Mahmud, Salleh, and Zaiton starred in the film. Initially entitled *Ribut di-Pulau Mutiara* (Storm on the Pearl Island), it is set in a fishing village after a horrendous typhoon has ravaged the people's homes and affected their livelihoods. It centres on the turbulent love story of Fatimah and Amir. A devious moneylender has coerced Fatimah to marry him instead of Amir. A heartbroken Amir copes with his loss by exploring pearl diving. The movie depicts life in Tanjong Kling. But in actuality what Santos was able to project were scenes that mimic life elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The stilt houses look like those in the rural villages of the Philippines and Indonesia. The setting, which includes coconut trees all around, the sea, and natural calamities such as a typhoon, projects a distinctive illustration of life in rural Southeast Asia. Similar to *Sergeant Hassan,* this film is an

interwoven tapestry of cultural and ideological elements of the region. The production of the film also crossed national borders. The distinctive nationalities of the actors are also blurred. The characters cease to be Malay or Filipino. The film is transnational in scope and in meaning and managed to accentuate the then-burgeoning notion of Southeast Asia. The film might have been shot and produced in the Malay language, but the complex network of narratives, techniques, and individuals employed in the film made it Southeast Asian.

Another Filipino, Ramon Estella had one of the longest and most successful transnational careers in Southeast Asia. He had experiences working in Malaya, Philippines, Vietnam, Italy, and the United States. Run Run Shaw, then the head of Shaw Brothers, hired him when the latter went to the Philippines during the Asian Film Festival (The Straits Times 1958, 2). He worked for the Shaw Brothers for almost eight years until 1963. Thereafter, he transferred to Cathay-Keris and made a few more Malay films including *Darah-Ku* (Of My Blood, 1963) with lead actors Maria Menado and Melak Selamat. Among his key productions are *Matahari* (The Spy, 1958), *Samseng* (Gangster, 1959), *Saudagar Minyak Urat* (The Liniment Merchant, 1959), *Pontianak Kembali* (The Return of the Pontianak, 1963), *Melanchong Ka-Tokyo* (Holiday in Tokyo, 1964), and *Dupa Chendana* (1964). During his time at Shaw, Estella brought to cinematic life one of Malaya's (as well as Indonesia's) mythological creatures – the ghost of a pregnant woman called *pontianak*. Estella contributed to the rising popularity of *Pontianak*-themed movies. His *Anak Pontianak* inspired B.N. Rao to roll out *Pontianak* and *Dendam*, both produced by the Cathay-Keris film studios in 1957. Abdul Razak wrote the script as well as the anthology of stories on which the *Pontianak*-themed films were based. The Shaw Brothers joined the bandwagon and convinced Abdul Razak to come up with a new manuscript for them. They hired Estella as the director and released the movie in February 1958 (Muhammad 2010).

Interestingly, *Pontianak* was not entirely foreign to the Filipino director. In the Philippines, there is another folklore creature called *tianak.* It is a demonic baby, or the ghost of a new-born who died, or an aborted foetus. Despite the intrinsic differences between the two creatures, these images belong in the same cultural landscape and imaginary. Thus, when shown in films, they were immediately recognised among Southeast Asians. Apart from the storyline, the geographical setting could also help Southeast Asians develop an affinity for the film and for each other. The movie would feature some village in Cebu or a community located a few miles away from Yogyakarta. With the exception of language (the region has diverse languages), the world unveiled in the film captures Southeast Asia in a nascent yet coherently recognisable form. Moreover, the presence of proverbial underworld characters that were easily understood and appreciated by the audience underscores an emerging Southeast Asian collective fantasy, or, in this case, a shared fear. Such visual images helped develop a collective regional imagination and worldview. As Milja Radovic explains about transnationality in films, "a stereotypical representation of 'others', and self-representation are dialogical: while our view of 'others' springs from our specific local ideological viewpoint, our self-representation might just as well

be shaped by global stereotypes" (Radovic 2014, 5). A transnational filmmaker such as Ramon Estella furthered the process when he produced films that transcended the themes of "national cinema." His productions, which dealt with transnational themes, helped impress on his audiences the notion of Southeast Asian regionalism.

Like Estella, another filmmaker also encouraged Southeast Asians to imagine a political space beyond their national boundaries. The father of Indonesian national cinema, Usmar Ismail, collaborated with producers and actors in Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore. Ismail entered into a joint venture with Cathay-Keris and produced the film *Bayangan Di-Waktu Fajar* (Shadows at Dawn, 1962). The film was co-produced by two giants in the region's film industry, Cathay Keris, who was based in Singapore, and Indonesia's PERFINI. The film also involved actors from the two countries (Berita Harian 1962, 7). The language was in "standardised Malay, which can be easily understood in both Malaya and Indonesia (The Straits Times, February 20, 1963).

Indonesian as well as Filipino films also found their way to Malaya and vice versa. For instance, Lamberto Avellana's award-winning film, *Badjao: Sea Gypsies* was screened in Malaya as *Badjau: Anak Laut,* with Malay subtitles. Usmar Ismail's films were sent to Manila for processing and he even encouraged some Indonesians to go to the Philippines for further training in film production. According to Said, "[i]t was in fact this Manila-connection that opened his [Ismail] eyes to the possibilities of the domestic film industry." Said further mentioned that when Ismail established his own studio, he used the Manila model as a basis (Heide 2002, 136). The interconnection among Southeast Asian filmmakers and their national film industries were clearly strong.

In a pivotal work on transnational history of Asian cinemas, Sangjoon Lee (2020) astutely unfurled the collaborations, networks, and competitions between newly independent states in Asia and highlighted the significance of American financial and administrative assistance in the emergence and development of Asian cinemas. Paradoxically, the first film festival in "Southeast Asia" organised by the Federation of Motion Picture Association in Southeast Asia was in fact held in Tokyo in May 1954. The following year, the festival was held in Singapore. We see here both the malleability of the concept of Southeast Asia, but more important to the subject of this article are the emergence of cross-border networks and platforms for exchange among Southeast Asian (and yes, Asian) filmmakers. In 1958, the Asian Film Festival was held in Manila, where the Shaw Brothers entered four films including P. Ramlee's *Orang Minyak* (The Curse of Oily Man), *Doctor*, *The Seal of Solomon*, and *Diau Charn of the Three Kingdoms*. It is important to note that *The Seal of Solomon*, directed by the American filmmaker Rolf Bayer, featured two Filipino actors and was presented in both Malay and Tagalog languages (The Straits Times, April 11, 1958). Indeed, this is a great development and echoes what Tom Hodge, head of the Malayan Film Unit, said in 1955 on the importance of bringing together Southeast Asian

filmmakers in film festivals as "it would lead to better productions" and thus, "give the public a chance to see the best films" in the region (The Straits Times, February 3, 1955).

The film industry in the region, then, was evidently interconnected and transnationally linked. These partnerships and cooperation influenced local filmmakers to produce cinematic narratives and employ images that subsequently formed a part of the web of perceptions and representations in the region. These cinematic products promoted the earliest collective imagination and perceptions of the region. They not only strengthened the connections among the people in Southeast Asia, they also opened new possibilities for Southeast Asians to visualise the region, and to develop empathy for the anti-colonial and decolonisation politics championed by their fellow Southeast Asians. Through the production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of the films, Southeast Asians were presented with the idea that they shared similar cultures, undertook common social practices, encountered familiar colonisation experiences, and confronted comparable anxieties in nation-building. The films effectively captured and fed their aspirations and fears as the Europeans retreated from the region.

## THE HOLLYWOOD FACTOR

Hollywood was another transnational force that affected Southeast Asian cinema. Following the end of World War II, Hollywood became rather influential in shaping Southeast Asia's cinematic landscape. It radically changed the regional film industry's production techniques and use of technology to make films. It also influenced the plots and story lines of Southeast Asian films. Hollywood furthermore played a part in moulding regional public opinion toward the Cold War and international politics. As the ideological battle between communist and anti-communist states escalated, Hollywood became an important instrument employed by the American government to condition the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians. At the same time, Southeast Asian filmmakers responded to Hollywood's foray into the regional film industry by consolidating and configuring new discourses about regionalism and international relations. Hollywood's arrival in the region, therefore, opened a new site for Southeast Asian filmmakers to develop shared political, ideological, and cultural subjectivities of an emerging Southeast Asia. These subjectivities can be identified in the region's cinematic productions (Cooke 2007, 1-16).

### Indonesia

In the case of Indonesia, the diffusion of politics into the cinematic world was apparent and can be understood by looking into the state, problems, and endeavours of American film companies in the country. The plight of American film companies resembled and reflected the complex and deteriorating

diplomatic relations between Indonesia and the United States. Various campaigns against the importation of American films began. Such campaigns were pursued mostly by members and officers of the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia) who were intensely anti-colonial and anti-American (Lacaba 2000, 27-29; Hanan 2001, 225-227).

As the US Embassy noted, the "matter was handled by the GOI more as a cultural and political problem than as an economic one. The PKI certainly saw it in this light and its attacks were almost entirely on the cultural and political level with little emphasis on movies as a branch of American business" (Ellis 1965). Clearly, Indonesians viewed Hollywood as a symbol and manifestation of American hegemony. Their clamour to stop the importation of Hollywood films reflects their desire to protect Indonesian culture and politics from any direct or indirect American influence. The Indonesian government, however, did not issue a decree banning American films. In fact, government intervention did not appear to be coordinated. American film companies such as Allied Artists, Columbia Films, MGM, Paramount Films, 20th Century Fox, United Artists, Universal Pictures, and Warner Brothers continued to be represented in the country by Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA). Some of these companies had also established local offices in Jakarta, which served as distributing companies for American-made films. The MPEAA also circulated films, in addition to its main function of acting as the primary representative body of American film companies (Jones 1965).

The campaign against American films was led by the Action Committee to Boycott American Imperialist Films (PAPFIAS), a group established by the PKI and other organisations in 1964. This was around the time when US official William Bundy publicly suggested that an expansion of Konfrontasi might result in a reduction of US aid. Konfrontasi began in 1963 when Indonesia's President Sukarno expressed his opposition against the formation of the Malaysian Federation, which included Malaya, Sarawak, Sabah, and Singapore. From Sukarno's perspective, Malaysia Federation would reinforce the neo-colonial power in the region. Both Sukarno and Minister Subandrio expressed their concern over the deterioration of their relationship to the US Ambassador Howard Jones. Utami Suryadarma, then the chairperson of PAPFIAS, was identified by the US Embassy as an extreme leftist. She also headed the Board of Censors (Hanan 2001, 211-251). The Suryadarma-led campaign was not novel. Before her group was established, there had been threats of an Indonesian boycott of Hollywood films. But no such boycott ever materialised. Nonetheless, following the establishment of PAPFIAS, an effective boycott started against American films (Hanan 2001, 211-251). At the request of American Ambassador Jones, President Sukarno instructed the First Deputy Prime Minister Subandrio to stop the boycott. However, Minister Subandrio's efforts were ineffective. Around mid-June 1964, more than 100 theatres were reportedly shut down. Film screenings were halted in the main cities of Java, except those done in the homes of Indonesian government officials, including the Presidential Palace in Jakarta. By July 1964, the National Front joined the campaign. Sukarno reassured Jones that the boycott would be resolved, but tensions escalated.

The film industry reflected the political tension between Indonesia and the United States. The development of Indonesian national cinema reflected international relations. By the 1960s, Indonesians regarded the United States with suspicion. Indonesian cinema united in opposition to Hollywood. It is clear that Indonesians perceived Hollywood as the end of a spectrum. As Salim Said suggests, Hollywood style (where the Chinese style of filmmaking was rooted) refers to the commercial pattern of making films where the director is not encouraged, or even allowed, artistic expression (Said 1991, 6). He further opined that Usmar Ismail and his cohort of friends represent the anti-thesis to Hollywood. They were the idealists – the nationalists, in essence – who attempted to portray the predicaments and challenges that Indonesia experienced (6-7). In other words, while Ismail epitomised the ideal Indonesian, the Americans exuded values and behaviour considered very un-Indonesian.

Hollywood's influence can be seen in the ways national cinemas reacted to it. Indonesian national cinema contested and opposed Hollywood, and in due course, constructed and defined itself. Indonesian filmmakers and producers opposed and held strong opinions about the dominance of Hollywood. Ardent nationalist leanings appeared in the movies and ideological and political debates within the film industry sparked. While opposing Hollywood's cultural and political sentiments grew, Indonesian filmmakers also adapted to the challenge posed by the US film industry. For example, Djamalludin Malik, a pioneering Indonesian film director, adapted the style and approach of Hollywood in his films. "Limited finances, equipment, and markets, of course, prevented the wholesale copying of Hollywood style but fundamentally, the working methods of this Indonesian producer [Malik] stayed close to Hollywood" (Said 1991, 8-9; Sumarno and Achnas 2002, 153-169). In other words, although filmmakers like Malik might have opposed American productions, they had no qualms about exploiting the filmmaking techniques and narrative styles of Hollywood to further their cinematic productions and widen the appeal of Indonesian cinema.

**Philippines**

If many Indonesians resisted and adapted to Hollywood hegemony, the people in the Philippines reacted differently to American films. Being under the tutelage of the Americans from 1899 to 1946 (interrupted by the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945), Filipinos were more tolerant and accommodating towards Hollywood. In fact, Hollywood served as the model to imitate. Yet, while 'imitating' Hollywood, Filipino filmmakers also indigenised it. The Filipinos consumed Hollywood films and adapted them in their creative works. Hollywood thus functioned as the transnational factor that moved regional filmmakers to modify and improve their craft. It also served as the archetype of 'the other' against which Filipino and other Southeast Asian filmmakers constituted their regional identity. Via their movies, these filmmakers would help the people of Southeast Asia to entertain the notion of regionalism.

The first encounter between Hollywood and Philippine cinema occurred in 1919. Albert Yearsley, an American who owned a theatre in Manila, collaborated with Universal Studios to produce a film in the Philippines. Directed by the American Henry MacRae, a segment of *The Dragon's Net* (1920) was filmed at several locations in the country (Francia 2002, 346-348). This film is significant because it was the first American film that used the Philippines as a shooting location. Eventually, more and more American film companies began to look at the Philippines not only as a location of filmmaking but also as a market for Hollywood. The 1920s saw the rise of the popularity of films in conjunction with the appeal of Hollywood among local talents. Filipino filmmakers travelled to the United States to gain more knowledge of American filmmaking techniques, processes, and cinematographic styles (Francia 2002, 347). For instance, Vicente Salumbides in cooperation with Jose Nepomuceno applied Hollywood techniques of close-ups, props, and make-up in the film *Miracles of Love* (1925). A large number of American filmmakers and films also found their way to the Philippines. Two Americans, George Harris and Eddie Tait, established the first film company in the Philippines patterned on Hollywood studios (Hawkins 2008). They dreamed of making Manila the film capital of Asia. In 1933, they introduced the first sound stage in the Philippines (Lacaba 2000, 90-91).

Harris and Tait also produced a well-known film called *Zamboanga* (1937) in collaboration with the local members of the film industry. It was shown in the United States and was for a long time considered a lost film. It was rediscovered when the prominent Filipino film historian Nick Deocampo identified it at a screening in the United States in 2004. The film brought onto the big screen the way of life of the people in Jolo, the southernmost part of the Philippines. It starred the famous actor Fernando Poe Sr. alongside Rosa del Rosario. Fernando played the main character of a pearl diver who weds Rosa, daughter of the community chief. On the day of the ceremony, a pirate kidnaps Rosa and sparks a bloody tribal war. Produced by Americans and helmed by Filipino actors, the film reflected Filipinos' accommodating and positive sentiments toward Hollywood.

While Americans such as Harris and Tai helped transform the filmmaking business in the Philippines, they also left behind other enduring legacies. American filmmakers and executives helped the US colonial authorities to develop the Philippines into a technological captive, dependent on the devices and equipment that the American colonial master imported. The years following the Second World War witnessed an intensification of such technological transfer. This did not result in the demise or the 'Hollywoodification' of what was to become the Philippine national cinema. Instead, these developments invigorated the local industry and catapulted it to the attainment of its own style, identity, and flavour. Indeed, American-made technology served indigenous directors to produce films that embody their own perspectives and interests (Cooke 2007).

Hollywood became one of the most crucial conduits for the spreading of American values and ideas to the Philippines. American films sparked the imagination of the Filipinos on what America was all about

or what Hollywood perceived the United States to be. It was an agent of cultural imperialism. It was an instrument to condition the hearts and minds of the Filipinos to believe in the benevolence of the Americans. This study does not elaborate on this subject matter, because there have been a few studies on this (Deocampo 2011; Deocampo 2007, 147-171). But it is crucial to establish how Hollywood was an essential imperial tool of the Americans to promote their values and ideology in the Philippines. The Vice President of Hollywood giant Warner Brothers, Joseph Hazen, once stated: "It [Hollywood] sells our motorcars, bathroom fixtures, furniture, electrical and the hundred and one articles which are shown in our films… But the American film is also America's greatest ambassador… It furnishes the principal means of entertainment for all the peoples throughout the world… and it is difficult for anyone whom you entertain and make laugh to hate you…" (Wake 1941, 37). This only corroborates that Hollywood was perceived as an important cultural carrier of American values. This does not mean though that the Filipinos merely borrowed Hollywood in wholesale. As in the case of other Southeast Asian states, the Philippines was not a passive recipient of American cultural flows. They selected, negotiated, and appropriated what was offered and presented by the Americans to produce their own identity. Hollywood provided the narrative style but local filmmakers altered to provide something that reflects Hollywood but is also innately Filipino.

The boom in Philippine secret agent films during the 1960s provides another good case to analyse the relationship between Hollywood and Southeast Asian national cinemas. Cold War tensions stimulated the production of Hollywood films that dealt, directly or indirectly, with the battle between communists and anti-communists. Films such as the James Bond series, particularly *Goldfinger* (1964) and *From Russia with Love* (1963), were popular with audiences. Their success encouraged Southeast Asian filmmakers to create their own indigenised versions of espionage films. In fact, during the 1966 Manila Film Festival, the Filipino James Bond was born. The film festival sought to shift the domestic audience's focus from foreign- to locally-made films. Among the entries, Tony Falcon's secret agent thriller *Sabotage* (1966) became the top-grosser. The film follows the plot and style of the James Bond movies. It revolves around the story of a Filipino spy who hunts down a syndicate planning to sabotage the country's power facilities. It has been described as the "best carbon copy of James Bond yet, with its torrid kissing scenes, chilling karate bouts, and very effective bang-bang" (Nolledo 1966, 69).

One can argue that this imitation of Hollywood reflects the lack of ingenuity of Filipino filmmakers and the prevailing 'colonial mentality' of the local audience. But the movie did not slavishly follow the plot and style of the James Bond movies. It sought to define, contest, and negotiate the notion of Philippine/ness vis-à-vis the imagery of Hollywood's Americanness. The triumph of a Filipino spy over his foreign adversaries can also be seen as the Filipinos' appropriation of foreign cultures to suit the local context. Not only was this film a box office hit in the country, it was also exported to Guam, Thailand, Hawaii, Indonesia, and Pakistan (Hawkins 2008, 295-370). The international success of a Philippine film was a way of contesting the power of Hollywood. In doing so, it asserted what was or

who was a Filipino. It became a source of national pride and honour. But more importantly, this film, like other Philippine films premised on the Hollywood-formula, became an arena to define the postcolonial identity of the Philippines (as well as its postcolonial relationship with the United States) at the height of the Cold War. It defined the Philippines self, not just in the cinematic world, but within the complex arena of the international system.

**Malaya/Malaysia**

The case of Malay/Malaysian national cinema bears similarities with the Philippines and Indonesian cases. Several things need to be clarified at the outset. First, Hollywood offered the technical and business model that facilitated the institution of the film industry in Malaya/Malaysia. Second, as in the rest of Southeast Asia, local Malayan/Malaysian directors borrowed and adopted cinematic styles from Hollywood. Third, Hollywood became a scape for local directors to negotiate and define the differences between American culture and Malayan/Malaysian culture. American films were associated with hedonistic ways of the West as opposed to the sophistication and elegance of British culture. In other words, Malayan/Malaysian cinema, like other Southeast Asian cinemas, resisted, responded to, or accommodated the dominant cultural and ideological influences of Hollywood. Finally, Hollywood served as a common external factor that pervaded Southeast Asia – as Malayan/Malaysian cinema in conjunction with other cinemas in the region responded to and maintained a constant 'dialogue' with Hollywood. The result was an integration of cinematic ideas, styles, and images across Southeast Asia that forged the burgeoning notion of regional identity.

Malayan/Malaysian cinema evolved in part because of its reactions and resistance to various external influences, among them Hollywood. At the beginning of Malay/Malaysian national cinema, directors from India adjusted Indian film narratives and styles to suit the local contexts and the response was positive. The Malayan audience patronised and welcomed the early productions by Indian directors such as B.S. Rahjan. Even *bangsawan* storylines influenced early film productions. Local legends, folktales, and historical and mythical accounts served as templates. Foreign films and narratives inspired local productions. For example, K.R. Shastry's film *Iman* (Faith, 1954) was an adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*. Hussein Hanif used Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a template for his film *Istana Berdarah* (Palace of Blood, 1964). Through these adaptations, Malay cinema developed and at the same time acquired distinctive features of Malayan/Malaysian-ness (Muthalib and Cheong 2002, 204-306).

External influences are identifiable in Malayan/Malaysian cinema. The narratives and styles from Hollywood and British films influenced and inspired the production of Malay films. For instance, social realism from Hollywood inspired directors such as P. Ramlee and Hussein Haniff. The latter's first film, *Hang Jebat* (1961) is considered a classic depiction of the protagonist as the anti-hero (Muthalib and

Cheong 2002, 204-306). On September 18, 1926, *The Times* published an article entitled "The Cinema in the East: Factor in the Spread of Communism." According to the anonymous author, there was a growing resistance and derision among the locals towards the Europeans. He further maintained that one of the fundamental reasons for this was cinema. More specifically, he asserted that the locals were easily swayed by American cinema which portrays a lack of values and indecent or improper behaviour. The author states:

> The simple native has a positive genius for picking up false impressions and is very deficient in the sense of proportion. By the unsophisticated Malay, Javanese, or even the Indian and the Chinese, the scenes of crime and depravity which are thrown on to the screen are accepted as faithful representations of the ordinary life of the white man in his own country (The Times 1926).

While the author might have overstated his case, American cinema was undoubtedly popular in the region. Many movie houses screened American films. During the 1930s, 71 percent of the total number of films screened in Malaya were produced by Hollywood filmmakers. The rest were Chinese or Indian. Malayan filmmakers were not popular then (Heide 2002, 131). Heide relates that "[w]hile American been as pervasive in Malaysia as elsewhere, its overall popularity ran (until the late 1990's) a distant second to that of Hong Kong film and its cultural influence similarly ran a poor second to that of Indian cinema" (Heide 2002, 243).

As in the case of the Philippines, Malaya too was influenced by the international success and popularity of James Bond. The Shaw Brothers produced *Jefri Zain dalam Gerak Kilat* (Jefri Zain in Operation Lightning, 1966). The film performed very well at the box office and was acclaimed for the realistic performance of the main actors, Jins Shamsudin and Sarimah. The unprecedent popularity of Jefri Zain films resulted in the production of other secret agent films. These borrowings further establish how Hollywood became an important model for Southeast Asian national cinemas.

The case of Malaya/Malaysia is distinctively different in some aspects from the Philippines and Indonesia. The dynamics between Hollywood and Filipino filmmakers were more open and accommodating. The Indonesians expressed quite a strong antagonism against American film businesses. Malaya/Malaysia, while influenced by Hollywood, was also heavily influenced by the British. As the colonial masters of Malaya, the British played a crucial role in the transmission or contact between Malaya/Malaysia and Hollywood. They acted as cultural brokers – on the one hand, they helped facilitate the introduction of Hollywood in the country but in some ways presented Hollywood as an alternative to British film, then considered the ideal model of Western cinemas.

The English writer-philosopher Aldous Huxley was of the opinion that "Hollywood has scattered broadcast over brown and black and yellow worlds a grotesquely garbled account of our civilisation" (Stevenson 1974, 211). His sentiments were not exceptional. Indeed, there was a prevalent perception that American films were ignominious on various levels: economic, moral, political, educational, and most importantly, colonial (211). Although Hollywood influenced the plots and genres of Southeast Asian films, it was still evident that Southeast Asians translated what they borrowed, copied, or imitated into products and images that displayed distinguishable Southeast Asian elements. These encounters between Hollywood and budding Southeast Asian national cinemas fuelled the creation of clearer images of Southeast Asia. The indigenisation of Hollywood narratives became a way for Southeast Asians to regain their agency against Western hegemonic narratives. As local filmmakers borrowed images and styles from Hollywood and changed them to suit their own contexts, they were able to construct coherent depictions of Southeast Asia. In this respect, Southeast Asian filmmakers operated as Orientalists – looking at and studying themselves. They formed visualisations of their nations and, through transnational links, even the region. They defined national identity and at the same time facilitated the creation of Southeast Asian regional identity.

## CONCLUSION

National cinemas in the region did not emerge in isolation. They were influenced by transnational forces that influenced their development and transformation. This article has explained how the transnational role of Chinese businessmen and immigrants instilled non-Western cinematic roots in Southeast Asia. They provided capital and financial resources to filmmakers, imported films from China, and were responsible for a lot of technical, aesthetic, and stylistic transference. More importantly, they conjured an alternative lens of viewing or portraying Southeast Asia and its people – an alternative perspective that would then influence Southeast Asian directors. The local filmmakers and producers formed an informal network of technology, people, and ideas that further invigorated the maturation of national cinemas. This article has also explained how these transnational collaborations were facilitated by the region's collective historical, social, and cultural attributes. Finally, Hollywood, a global cinematic force, impacted the region as a whole. Hollywood flooded the market and gained unprecedented popularity in the region. It influenced the cinematic apparatus, material production, business-model, technique, as well as ideology of Southeast Asian cinemas. As perhaps the most enduring transnational linkage in the region, Hollywood infiltrated the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaya/Malaysia in so many levels and ways, inciting perceptible responses from them. In other words, their own national identity was solidified and somehow refined upon direct contact with the seeming homogenous form of Hollywood. What we have seen in Southeast Asia was that the global potency of Hollywood (in conjunction with other transnational forces identified) brought about networks and individual communities that paved the way for the materialisation of their respective cultural particularities. This

phenomenon complements the case of Southeast Asia well as it is often described as a unified yet highly diversified region. These transnational linkages were crucial for various reasons. They helped in the development of the technology, apparatus, style, and technique of national cinemas, served as conduits for the connections and interactions among Southeast Asian nations, and, most importantly, crafted the preliminary ideas and notions of regional identity in Southeast Asia long before its formal institutionalisation.

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