

ASEAN Film Week: An Evaluation and Strategies for Future Development

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ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini menilai keberkesanan Minggu Filem ASEAN: projek tahunan yang dibiayai oleh Jawatankuasa Kebudayaan dan Penerangan ASEAN. Objektif utama program ini adalah bagi menggalakkan promosi dan kefahaman karya-karya filem di antara negara-negara ahli ASEAN. Objektif ini bagaimanapun sering termiring oleh keghairahan pihak penganjur untuk membawa para delegasi ke tempat-tempat menarik dan menyediakan jamuan makan malam yang mewah menyebabkan penayangan filem tidak lagi menjadi agenda utama. Masalah penukaran filem tidak pernah selesai. Obligasi kebudayaan di pihak badan kerajaan dan perkiraan ekonomik di pihak pengeluar filem seringnya menimbulkan jalan buntu dalam setiap perbincangan. Hal ini juga menyebabkan tempoh penayangan filem menjadi minima. Tulisan ini turut merasionalisasikan kepentingan tempoh tayangan dalam agenda pertukaran filem sebagai produk yang mampu mengatasi batas budaya dan bangsa. Peranan kelab seni filem, arkib dan lain-lain agensi kerajaan yang berkaitan turut diperbincarkan sebagai agen yang dapat merealisasikan objektif ini. Cadangan tentang cara atau formula juga disarankan bagi penerbitan filem yang mampu menarik minat penonton berbagai peringkat umur. Pilihan kumpulan dibuat berdasarkan tinjauan di bandar-bandar utama di Malaysia dan kemudian dibandingkan dengan keutamaan pilihan berdasarkan statistik laporan Minggu Filem ASEAN di Jakarta tahun 1989.

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of ASEAN Film Week: a yearly project funded by the ASEAN Committee in Culture and Information. The main objective of programme is to encourage the promotion and dissemination of ASEAN films among fellow member countries. This objective however was lost each time the programme takes place in the capital city of each member countries because of the wrong emphasis given. Screening of films normally becomes secondary as host country seems to pay more attention to bringing delegates on visits to places of interest and giving them dinner parties.

Thus, the film exchange programme remains unsolved. Cultural obligation the part of the government organisation and the economic calculation from

the part of the film producers, distributors and exhibitors seem to come to a dead-lock in each negotiation. This resulted in a minimal screening time if films from each member countries. This paper attempts to rationalise the importance of film screening on an exchange basis because films are the actual product of a creative endeavour that could cross racial and cultural barriers. This paper also outlines the role of cine clubs, film archive and other related government bodies that could help towards realising the main objective of the programme. It also suggests ways and formulas that could be adopted by ASEAN film -makers in producing films that would appeal to a majority audience in different age group. Data on group preferences are collected from a survey done in major Malaysian towns and the statistics are compared to those provided by the ASEAN Film Week report from Jakarta in 1989.

INTRODUCTION

ASEAN Film Week, a project of the ASEAN Committee in Culture and Information (COCI), was initiated by the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia (FINAS) in 1987. This led to the first ASEAN Film Week the was held in Jakarta in 1989, followed by the second in Kuala Lumpur in 1990, the third in Manila in 1991, and now the fourth is here in Bangkok in 1993. This is an annual festival where artistes and entrepreneurs in the film industry from the ASEAN countries come together to discuss matters of common interests.

The main objective if this festival is to encourage the promotion and dissemination of ASEAN films among fellow member countries. Incidentally, this has also always been one of the recommendations put forward by delegates, which include film producers, directors, actors, and scriptwriters, to seminars and forums held in conjunction with the previous film weeks in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila. The other recommendations deal with the various aspects of film production, distribution and exhibition. However, to what extent all these recommendations have been justly addressed and mobilised from paper to practice is yet to be examined and measured.

Objectives, recommendations, suggestions - they all look good on paper - are often difficult to implement as film production, distribution and exhibition have always been complex activities that require much careful planning in balancing between the art and the profit as film making is both an art and a business endeavour. When more focus is placed on the artistic aspect, the result is naturally less focus on the business' aspect. Similarly, one can be accused of neglecting the art and culture when emphasis is placed on the business' aspect.

ASEAN FILM SCREENING

Since this an ASEAN film Week, the most important commodity should rightly be the films. The question then is: It really worth the while in terms of time and money spent in organising this festival to show just one film from each member country each time the festival is held? Or should we instead take advantage of this festival to introduce more ASEAN films to the film audience of the host country? In other words, perhaps each country should be recommended to bring in at least three of their locally produced films, and consequently more time should be allocated for film screening.

The festival is also the time for the delegates to meet to discuss new concepts and ideas pertaining to every aspect of the film trade. The delegates often consist of actors and actresses, producers, directors and scriptwriters who are all key personnel in the various aspects of the film trade. In this context, the festival is probably the best opportunity for the host country to introduce to its guests as many of its local artistes and film-related individuals as possible. The rationale is that it is comparatively less expensive for the host country to line up its film artistes to meet delegates for the purpose of exchanging ideas than for the guest countries to send a large entourage to festival. It is, therefore, hoped that the other ASEAN member countries, when it is their turns to host future film weeks, will do likewise.

FILM EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

Film exchange programmes among the ASEAN member countries are in fact better stated on paper than are currently being carried out. Except for Malaysia and Indonesia, there seems to be no other member countries that have engaged themselves in the film exchange programme. A case in point is the fact that the Malaysian film audience do not know of any films from Thailand and the Philippines for in Malaysian there has been no public screening of films produced in either of these countries.

Therefore, if we are serious about implementing the objective of the COCI of ASEAN countries as stated and agreed upon in Jakarta in 1989, later in Kuala Lumpur in 1990, and Manila in 1991, we have to do something now.

During the workshop in Kuala Lumpur, it was mentioned that "the assistance of ASEAN COCI be solicited to support an exchange programme of ASEAN feature films and video programmes which might also constitute a pool of products for possible exhibition in international film festivals." Perhaps for now we should first put aside our involvement in international film festivals and instead concentrate our attention on very own film week or festival. In fact, this ASEAN Film Week in itself is the best time for us to exchange films among ourselves the member countries of ASEAN. What we need is to ensure that the ASEAN Film Week is held annually and that each

member country willingly takes its turn to be the host. Should each member country be willing to leave its respective films with the host country during each annual ASEAN Film Week, we would already be on our way to build a strong foundation to achieve our goal.

It cannot be denied that films exchanged through this manner will not generate huge profits for the films concerned. Nevertheless, if we have to start somewhere this is where we can start laying the foundation for the eventual actual trading of films among member countries. The trading could be carried out through a film market that is committed to buying and selling of films by distributors for general release in the member countries.

IS LANGUAGE THE BARRIER?

It is a common practice for ASEAN films to be made in the language of each respective country, and more often than not, the language of one country is foreign to the people of the other member countries. While Bahasa Malaysia or the Malay language is understood in Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and Southern Thailand, it is not understood in the Philippines despite the fact that some Malay words have their origin in the same root-words as Tagalog. In fact, Tagalog and Thai are hardly spoken and understood in the other member countries.

At a glance, it seems that the absence of a lingua franca in ASEAN films is the cause of a major setback in the film exchange programme. Currently only Malaysia and Indonesia have had some success in their film exchange venture (although the flow of films between the two countries still leaves much to be desired). The reality, however, is that film has its own language. Like music, the language of film is universal.

A film can be understood in its basic capacity without the audience having to understand the spoken language used. It was reported that in the 50s and 60s, Indian films using Hindi were popularly patronised by the Malays and Chinese of the then Malay. This was despite the fact that the audience did not understand a word of Hindi.

Pokpui (Tell Them We're Number One), a Japanese sub-titled Thai film by Udom Udomroj was readily understood by the Asian delegates who spoke neither Thai nor Japanese. The film was screened at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1991. Similarly, *Love in a Slice of bread*, an Indonesia film by Garin Nugroho was much appreciated by Asian film artistes who spoke no Indonesian.

Pokpui is a comedy while *Love in a Slice of Bread* is a teenage love-story. Both films used what is known as a universal film language. The meaning of the film and the intention of the film makers were skilfully conveyed through the plotline, visual sequence, film editing, framing of shots, musical score, and sound. Thus it is clearly proven that the spoken

language is not a barrier. Furthermore, subtitling the film in either English or the language of the country where the film is exhibited often help to narrow the gap even more. Subtitling, a task that is easily carried out, has enabled many Asian people to enjoy many American and Hong Kong films.

THE ROLE OF CINE CLUBS

Cine Clubs, government institutions like the National Film Development Corporation, universities, embassies, and other non-profit organisations have played their roles in laying the foundation for the promotion and dissemination of Asian films. The Malaysian Film Club in Kuala Lumpur, for example, has long been doing its part in promoting films. It promotes not only films from the Asian region but also films from other parts of the world in its effort to provide an alternative to what is offered by the mainstream cinema. The Malaysian National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) has also been screening foreign films fortnightly at its mini theatre.

However, if films are to be treated only as a business commodity, there is actually not much that could be done to address the issue of the film exchange programme among ASEAN member countries. The lure of the American and Hong Kong films has in many ways eliminated the chances of having ASEAN films slotted for screening in public theatres in the capital cities of member countries. Furthermore, these films have often claimed to be huge box-office successes each time they are being distributed and exhibited. What we could perhaps do for now is to put aside the business aspect and concentrate on the artistic and cultural aspects if we want to get the ball rolling for more ASEAN films to be screened.

FUND FOR SELECTED ASEAN FILM-MAKERS

National film organisations are in the position to determine if certain individuals have attained acceptable standard in film-making. Certain criteria could be used to determine the rating or standing of the film-makers for the purpose of granting them fund in support of their projects. These criteria may include winning awards at both local and international festivals, foreign recognition, academic qualification, and the seriousness of subject matter chosen to highlight national issues.

Film-makers sometimes need to solicit fund for their projects, and it could be rather embarrassing if they have to approach organisations outside their own countries or from an association of countries of which their countries are not members. It is commonly known that organisations from Japan, England, Germany and the United States of America have given support to ASEAN film-makers for their projects. It is not suggested here that

they should be forbidden to seek this sort of support, but what is suggested is that perhaps they should get support from home, especially if they have proven themselves in their respective fields. In view of this, it is high time perhaps to seriously think about the setting up of an ASEAN Film Development Fund. This proposal in fact has been unanimously accepted during the symposium session in Kuala Lumpur in 1990.

ASEAN FILMS FOR INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Being a film-maker myself, I can feel and share the pride each time an ASEAN film gets selected for the International Film Festival, not to mention if they should win an award or two.

Records show that Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia have each carved a name in the international scene through the film festivals. The late Lino Brocka's *Manila: In the Claws of Darkness* (1974) and *Insiang* (1975) were accepted by Cannes Film Festival in 1986. Mike de Leon, another Philippines' film director, has his *Kisapmata* (1981) and *Batch 81* (1982) selected by Cannes in 1982 and both films were featured in the Directors' Fortnight. From Thailand, Cherd Songsri's *Pale Kaow* (*The Scar*) won a Grand Prix at the Nantes Film Festival in 1981. From Indonesia, films by Teguh Karya, Wim Umbuh, Slamet Rahardjo and Eros Djarot have gained international recognition at festivals in Berlin, London, Hong Kong, and New York. From Malaysia Anwardi Jamil's *Tuah* was selected for the Montreal festival in 1990, Rahim Razali's *Anak Sarawak* and Hatta Azad Khan's *Mat Som* for the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1990 and 1991, together with other films from Indonesia and Thailand.

Festival films are seldom box-office success. Thus, if we want to talk about popularising ASEAN films at international film festivals, we must be prepared to spend money. The Japanese has done this and with great success too. There were times when they would make films that are meant solely for foreign festivals, and they spent money promoting these films at those festivals.

It is a common saying that "more heads are better than one." ASEAN film-makers, therefore, should take advantage of occasions such as this ASEAN Film Week to meet fellow film-makers to discuss film ideas which, based on their experience, are saleable in foreign film festivals. ASEAN films or for that matter films from the Third World countries are often viewed by these Foreign Festival from perspectives that are different from our norm. For one, box-office success was never the main criterion as they are never interested in taking films which are similar to what are being produced in the west. In this respect, ASEAN film-makers should be original in their approach.

ASEAN FILM CENTRE

While I was in Shibuya, Tokyo for the Tokyo International Film Festival, I had the honour to be invited by Mr. Kenzi Ishizaka, Film co-ordinator, to visit the Japan Foundation's ASEAN Cultural Centre. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the centre has a very good collection of films from ASEAN countries. In fact was told that every year, the centre even organises a film week for each of the ASEAN countries. The Japanese has the money and the commitment to have such a centre established with complete archive and screening facilities. The question then is if Japan could do it, why couldn't we the ASEAN countries? We do have the resources and the infrastructure. What we need is just a common understanding among the various interrelated departments or organisations, the national archive, the National film Board, the city council and the COCI, and each capital city of the ASEAN countries could have its own ASEAN Film Centre. If we have to start small, let us start small rather than not starting at all.

We could propose that films brought in by each member country for the film festival be left with the organising committee for a specified period of time. During this time, the film could then be circulated and exhibited in the host country. Bangkok, for example, would this round get at least nine or ten films from the participating member countries. Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Singapore and Brunei will enjoy this special privilege in the future when it is their turns to host the event.

Film archive could also play a supporting role in the safe-keeping of the print and subsequently open a new section just for ASEAN films. Cine clubs of each countries could participate by organising the screening of these films.

LOOKING FOR A FORMULA

The global trend today seems to be that rich people do not generally watch films in the local theatre, and they do not patronise local productions. Similarly, highly educated young people also tend to snub local productions, but they from the majority of they audience who support imported films especially those from America.

The following statistics collected from a three-year (1989-1991) survey in the Malaysian capital and other major towns in the country reveals some interesting trends. The survey covered one thousand respondents from Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johore Bahru. They were picked at random to answer a questionnaire.

The findings report that 75% of the film audience consists of those in the 15-25 age group. The respondents also indicated the types of film preferred: 35% were for comedy, 28% for action/thriller and 17% for love story or teenage romance. It was also found that 70% of those who frequent the

cinema were those whose monthly earnings were below US\$400 or RM1,000. Of the respondents, 65% have only attended high school.

These data are found to be similar to those compiled during the ASEAN Film week in Jakarta in 1989 and Kuala Lumpur in 1990 when three films from Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia were shown.

The Jakarta audience survey showed that 65% of the respondents were below 18 and 26% were in the 18-25 age group. The Kuala Lumpur audience survey showed that only 5% were below 18 and 49% were in the 18-25 age group.

With regards to types of films which the respondents preferred, the Jakarta audience most popular choice were in the order of drama, historical films, comedy, action thriller and love story while the Kuala Lumpur audience most popular choice were drama, comedy, historical film, love story and action thrillers.

If the above categories of films were to be reclassified to accommodate overlap, the result would be that the most popular types of film chosen by the majority of the audience in the above two surveys are in the order of comedy, dramatic films (love-story and family drama) and action films (thrillers/war/history).

If the above data are to be taken as a guide, then we need to ask ourselves if we have to bow down to the choice or taste of the audience. Two recent films in Malaysia have proven that a clever mixture of teenage love and fast action dramatic thriller spiced with some humour has ensured a great success at the box office. The above ingredients have been cleverly put to use by a young director, Aziz M. Osman in his film *XX Ray* and again by Yusoff Haslam in his *Bayangan Maut* (Shadow of Death) and *Pemburu Bayang* (Shadow Hunter). All these three films registered more than a million dollars in takings at the box office. In fact, *Pemburu Bayang* has easily collected RM 1.25 million after just two weeks of showing at 19 cinemas throughout the country.

Intelligently made films should always rule the day. There were many occasions when silly and slapstick comedies were ignored by the Malaysia audience, and these films survived only a few days at the cinema circuits.

Despite the fact that the majority of the cinema goers were from the lower education group, the above surveys also indicated that there is an increasing proportion of those who are more educated (college and university education) among the audience. This group who belongs to the higher income bracket has also begun to appreciate good local productions. *Selubong*, a serious film about religious fanaticism, for example, was shown for more than a month in Kuala Lumpur and has attracted a great number of people who come from the middle class with monthly income of more than US\$400.00 RM 1,000.

While intelligent film-makers strive to be artistic, we cannot deny the fact that we cannot totally disregard the choices of the majority of the audience. Thus, the best way perhaps is to stay in the middle; incorporating in the films both the artistic and the commercial or popular values. The only subtle way to upgrade the thinking capacity of the audience is by elevating the content of the films. By doing so, we could save them from being lost in the world of romance, slapstick comedy and Hollywood type of bash and smash action-packed thrillers which all serve purely as entertainment with no consideration for any humanistic and cultural values.

CONCLUSION

The development of ASEAN national cinema is in the hands of ASEAN artistes and practitioners. We, the people in the film industry, should be more sensitive to the needs to constantly come up with new approaches to promote our own films among the ASEAN member countries.

In Malaysia, FINAS has done a good job in helping the national film industry establish a solid foundation in the production, distribution and exhibition of locally produced films. FINAS has introduced a production support scheme, has offered equipment and post production facilities at a subsidised rate, and has refunded entertainment tax to the producers.

FINAS organises training programmes, both locally and abroad. It has also enforced a compulsory screening of local films for at least a week in all theatres in the country. Currently FINAS deals with licensing in the local film industry, enforcement of strict regulation for film and video screenings as well as acting against piracy.

However, despite the above assistance, we still face many setbacks. For instance, the Hong Kong and the American film cultures continue to dominate our national film culture. American's high-tech films and Hong Kong's action-packed thrillers and comedies still rule the day. This phenomenon is true in the other ASEAN capitals too.

Statistics shows that in Malaysia, out of a total of 957 films exhibited in 1980, 457 were Chinese (Hong Kong), 291 English (American), 50 Indonesia, 143 Indian (Hindi and Tamil) and only 14 were locally produced national films (Malay).

In Thailand, according to Lent (1990:217), between 1983 and 1985, there were 723 imported films exhibited. Of these, 349 were American, 336 Chinese, 19 Indian, 6 Japanese, and 13 others. Indonesian and Singaporean cinemas are also dominated by both American and Hong Kong films.

How then can we go about changing this less desirable Trend? There are several strategies through which we could attempt to establish a strong ASEAN (local) film culture:

PROJ. FOR. CINE. (INDO. MALAY)
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1. Re-educating the thinking of our cinema-goers by having special film appreciation programmes conducted for and targeted at this group (as identified by previous surveys in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur) so that appreciation for locally produced films may be enhanced. In fact, such programmes have been carried out successfully in Malaysia during the 1980s.
2. Setting up more film clubs to screen selected local and imported films in an attempt to introduce cinema-goers to good productions and consequently help them re-assess their choice of films.
3. Film-makers shouldering the responsibility of incorporating more local values in their choice of subject matters for film-making.
4. Authorities in the film industry to be more sensitive to quality assurance, in terms of content and product, when granting financial support to film-makers.

RUJUKAN

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