

— SPOTLIGHT ON —
*Singapore
Cinema*

Starring

NOORDIN AHMAD

LATIFFAH OMAR

ROSEYATIMAH



**CHUCHU
DATOK
MERAH**

Directed : **M. AMIN**

A CATHAY-KERIS FILM

FOREWORD

Films are wonderful expressions of culture, creativity and inspiration. They can transport us to different worlds, shed light on global cultures, or serve as archives for treasured memories.

To commemorate SG50 and our rich film-making history, the Media Development Authority is proud to present *Spotlight on Singapore Cinema* featuring five iconic films from the 1950s to 70s – the Malay period drama, *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963); Cathay-Keris' first post-war Chinese film, *The Lion City* (狮子城) (1960); early P. Ramlee drama *Patah Hati* (1952); Hokkien opera *Taming of the Princess* (醉打金枝) (1958); and Tamil romantic drama *Ninaithale Inikkum* (1979). Each film captures Singapore's socio-political, cultural and historical heritage, and offers viewers a glimpse into life in Singapore back in the day.

The films were carefully selected and curated by the Media Development Authority's Singapore Film Commission in collaboration with the National Library Board, National Archives of Singapore, Asian Film Archive, and the National Museum of Singapore Cinematheque. Four of the five films were painstakingly restored from their only surviving print reels, as part of our efforts to preserve our unique cinematic and cultural heritage.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who has helped to make this project a success. I would also like to pay tribute to the early filmmakers who have paved the way for successive generations of homegrown talent. The MDA and Singapore Film Commission will continue to preserve our rich legacy and nurture aspiring talent to tell our stories here and abroad.

Finally, I thank the public for their overwhelming support. I hope that all of you, young and old, will enjoy *Spotlight on Singapore Cinema*, and continue to support film-making in Singapore for many more years.

Mr Gabriel Lim,
Chief Executive Officer,
Media Development Authority



View of Changi Road with Taj Cinema in the background c. 1963.
Photo Credit: National Archives of Singapore



Villagers gathering for a movie c. 1960s.
Photo Credit: National Archives of Singapore



Hand-painted poster for *Chuchu Datok Merah*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

CHUCHU DATOK MERAH

Literal English Translation of Film Title: Datok Merah's Grandson



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

Director: M. Amin
Year: 1963
Produced by: Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd
Main Cast: Nordin Ahmad, Latifah Omar, Roseyatimah, A. Rahim

A period drama complete with Malay symbolisms, myth and folklore, the film title *Chuchu Datok Merah* points to the mental image Malays have of themselves as descendants of Hang Tuah, the legendary Malay warrior of Malacca. Awang Janggut, the main character of Amin's film, is very much a pseudo-warrior. Instead of possessing the "keris", a warrior's weapon, he owns a prize-winning rooster. His battlefield is the cock fight arena. He lives in a big but empty house inherited from his ancestor, and would rather live in poverty than go to work. The closest he comes to living the high life of a warrior is when a successful businessman employs him as a bodyguard after he prevented hooligans from taunting the businessman's daughter, Siti.

Despite knowing Awang is married, Siti continues to flirt with Awang and eventually catches his attention. Awang's pregnant wife is often left alone till late night and eventually falls sick and miscarriages. The story ends in tragedy when the hooligan who harassed Siti, who still holds a grudge against Awang, decides to poison Awang's sick wife by giving her some "herbs", claiming it is from Awang. The film is a social criticism of people who rest on their laurels and ancestry instead of working for themselves. It is also one of the finest examples of the anti-hero in Malay cinema.

CHUCHU DATOK MERAH

By M Amin

**A CINEMA OF EMBITTERED
MEN & FLAWED WOMEN**

By Hassan Abd Muthalib



Hand-painted poster for *Chuchu Datok Merah*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

INTRODUCTION

The themes of alienation, jealousy, betrayal, arrogance and revenge were the staple of some Hollywood films in the 1940s and 1950s. No doubt this was brought about by the Second World War and the post-war situation when the ordinary man, physically and mentally, was confounded with a never-experienced before milieu. Life was difficult; there was uncertainty about the future, and many became fatalistic. The unnerving times and their despair became reflected in the writings of scriptwriters, leading to a subgenre of films later known as film noir (French: literally 'dark cinema'). A major element in the characterisation was ambiguity between 'the good guy' and 'the bad guy'. Elements of film noir found their way into the early Malay films of the early 1960s, and could be seen in the films of legendary director P. Ramlee in the Shaw Brothers studio productions such as *Antara Dua Darjat* (*Between Two Classes*, 1960), and *Ibu Mertua-ku* (*My Mother-in-Law*, 1962). A more realistic portrayal of the Malay man and how extreme he could become can be found in Cathay Keris productions of *Hang Jebat* (*The Warrior, Hang Jebat*, 1961) directed by Hussein Haniff, and *Chuchu Datok Merah* (*The Grandson of Datok Merah*, 1963) directed by M. Amin. The 'noir world' was already existent in the Malay feudalistic milieu where the common man continually lived in fear of royalty, aristocracy, the rich and the powerful.

The screenplay for *Chuchu Datok Merah* (CDM) was a collaboration between Ali Aziz and M. Amin. Aziz had earlier written the screenplay for *Hang Jebat* while Amin had been the assistant director. In 1962, Amin debuted as a director for *Lanchang Kuning* (*The Yellow Vessel*). Amin's early inexperience could be seen in the way he handled his camera with scenes that were recordings rather than interpretations. However, the film was a success at the box office. With his second film - CDM, Amin showed his mettle at narrative and style in the manner of P. Ramlee and Hussein Haniff. It is notable that these three directors of early Malay cinema stand out as true filmmakers, that is, directors who understood narrative and the stylistics

“ This world is useless. Our sincerity, bravery, boldness is not looked upon highly... ”

– Nordin Ahmad
in *Chuchu Datok Merah*

necessary to carry a subtext, something that was missing in the works of the other Malay directors of the period¹. Like Ramlee, Amin too excelled when he had the right team to work with. In some of his other films, he collaborated with the same writers - Ali Aziz and Shariff Medan, cinematographer Hsu Chiao Meng, art director J.S. Antony and lead actor Nordin Ahmad. Among these films were *Tajol Ashikin* (the name of the main character, 1963), and *Ayer Mata Duyong* (*Tears of the Mermaid*, 1964).

THE STORY

CDM is a period drama set in feudal times that includes traditional Malay cultural beliefs of the supernatural. Awang Janggut (Nordin Ahmad) has a chip on his shoulder and prides himself on being a descendant of Datok Merah, a famous warrior in the state of Terengganu in Peninsula Malaya. However, Awang lives in poverty with his wife, Wan Kuntum (Latiffah Omar). Kuntum stands by him even when he is recalcitrant. Not wanting to work for anyone, Awang chooses not to be employed, especially not for Hassan, the rich man of the village. Hassan (Yem Jaafar) also considers Awang as being below his status. One day, Awang saves Hassan's daughter Siti (Roseyatimah) from being harassed by Long Daik (A. Rahim). Reluctantly, Hassan offers Awang work as his family's security guard. Despite knowing Awang is married, Siti flirts with Awang and eventually catches his attention with her admiration for his warrior-like character. With Awang's new relationship, his wife Kuntum is often left alone at home. Awang quarrels with Kuntum and beats her up. Still holding a grudge against Awang, Long Daik plots to poison Awang's wife by sending her some herbs in Awang's name. The events become inextricably linked, bringing the story to a tragic end.

Both Aziz and Amin understood the Malay world and its culture of bygone years, as well as elements of it that were still existent in post-War Singapore among some of the migrant Malays and the upper classes of Malay society. At the time, there could also not be any overt criticisms of the British in films. This was written into the contracts of the film directors². The non-critical stance continued and became a norm even after Malaya gained its independence in 1957. Aziz and M. Amin took a similar tack in CDM but wrote it into the narrative. The rich man, Hassan, who looks down upon Awang, is a foreigner who became wealthy in the village (read: British imperialists in Malaya). His daughter, Siti, is not the traditional, demure Malay girl. She is very upfront, and openly confesses her affections for the protagonist. This behavior is alien to the Malay society.

The cinematographer for both *Hang Jebat* and CDM was Hsu Chiao Meng, a stage and film man from Shanghai who owned a film studio called Nusantara Film in Singapore in the early 1950s. Hsu was an

intelligent man and would have undoubtedly been of immense help in the film's visual storytelling strategies³. This is borne out in the mise-en-scene or scene structuring, throughout the film. The protagonist in *CDM* was a continuation of the character cast in the same mould as that in *Hang Jebat*. It is no coincidence that Nordin Ahmad had also appeared in *Hang Jebat* as a righteous rebel who cannot survive in a feudal society.



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

THE TREATMENT

Both *CDM* and *Hang Jebat* were outstanding as they presented a new kind of protagonist – the anti-hero. Nordin Ahmad, a serious person who did not mix well with others in real life, played the role well⁴. Nordin was a quiet man who was diligent in his work. To Nordin Ahmad, the script was something that was organic⁵. Nordin would read the script numerous times to understand the content and appreciate how one character interacted with another. Nordin brought a sense of ambiguity to the portrayal of the character of Awang who would switch from a brooding and bitter man to one who would suddenly show love for his wife, but in the next moment, indulge in arrogance and recalcitrance.

A cursory look at *CDM* makes it out to be just another Malay period drama from the Cathay Keris studios set in feudal times. On closer scrutiny, one finds that the film has a highly formal narrative structure, distinctive cinematic style, and carefully scripted dialogue that is connected to the core of the story and points to the characters' innate nature.

The film opens with an illustration of a man and woman lying dead in water. This scene is repeated in the last scene when Awang and Kuntum drown in the whirlpool. With the first visual, Amin denotes the fatalism in the story: that life is pre-ordained; free will is an illusion. People like Awang, who try to rebel and go against the grain, are not able to see this. In the following visuals, Awang squats on a bridge, tosses a stone into a whirlpool, and says nonchalantly "The river demon has not swallowed anyone for some time..." His wife interjects, chiding him for uttering words that may challenge the devil and invite ill luck. In the following shots in Extreme Long Shot (ELS), signifiers of impending danger, the mise-en-scene shows the couple walking across the bridge and along the beach to a festival area. When Siti witnessed Awang's cockerel defeating Long Daik's at the festival, it sets the story spiraling out of control.

Another early example in the story is when Siti shows her narcissistic side by admiring herself in a mirror and asking her hand-maiden if there is anyone prettier than her. This depiction of Siti signifies another behaviour that is contrary to the Malay culture. Towards the end of the film when Kuntum faces the heartache of losing her husband to Siti, she also looks into the mirror. She is not doing so to admire herself but to contemplate on what has gone wrong in the relationship.

She is silent and sees scenes of happier days when she and Awang were just married. After that, she drinks the poisoned herbs and looks into the mirror again, horrified to see herself becoming ugly. The film form suggests a similarity as well as a contrast. Both women look into the mirror but only Kuntum sees herself physically becoming ugly. Siti is obviously unaware that she is the 'ugly' one on the inside. The noir world she is in "revolves around causality. Events are linked...and lead inevitably to a heavily foreshadowed conclusion..." Kuntum is the film noir's 'menaced woman' who is tormented psychologically by the femme fatale archetype⁶.

There are also similarities among the men. Awang and Hassan, though at extreme ends of the social hierarchy, are actually alike. Awang ignores his wife's plea to find employment with Hassan. Awang refuses, saying: "Hassan came with only a sarong like a beggar. How can he lord it over us?" He reiterates that his warrior grandfather will be furious if he knows about it. He eventually meets Hassan so as to please his wife. He stands arrogantly in front of the rich man in a posture unlike the traditional Malay. Hassan, with the same arrogance, tells him to get out, saying that he will not entertain any descendant of Datok Merah. Their argument is interrupted by the arrival of Wan Mu (M. Osman) who has come looking for a job. Hassan undergoes a quick change in demeanor and warmly greets Wan Mu who brings a gift of gold. Awang stomps out in disgust at Hassan's hypocrisy.

The story of *CDM* is full of embittered men and flawed women set in a milieu full of foreboding. Long Daik is a sore loser who seeks revenge by using sorcery⁷. Even neighbours offer no consolation. They whisper about Awang living in past glory. They even allude to him being childless, something that is looked down upon in those days. Only two older men (Hassan's assistant and Awang's uncle) display the modesty so befitting of the true Malay, but Awang pays no heed to them. When the uncle leaves Awang's house in the morning after paying a visit, he looks at the sky and remarks that the weather that day is going to be good. Awang cynically replies: "It all depends on the individual. If it's good on the inside, it will also be good outside."

The screenplay of Ali Aziz and M. Amin delves deep into human psychology and explores the central issues of modern philosophy; how we distinguish the character of humans and their reactions to the things that confront them. In the character-driven screenplay of Aziz and Amin, the story is driven by what is going on in the mind of the characters when they are up against deeply emotional situations⁹.

When Siti sees Awang for the first time, it is at the cock fight. When Awang wins, she tells her hand maiden of how bold and brave he is. It hits the right chord with Awang and he is delighted that she is the first one to value his bravery. He gets drawn deeper into her web of deceit. Siti's fickleness is revealed when she sets her eyes on another suitor even after expressing her desire for Awang. Wan Kuntum, on the other hand, is submissive and loyal to her husband. But even Kuntum has her limits. In a moment of desperation, she slaughters Awang's prized cockerel and serves it to him for dinner. Not knowing that his wife is pregnant, Awang beats her up in his rage¹⁰.



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

CONCLUSION

CDM uses the Aristotelean story trajectory with a beginning, middle and end. There is a closure but it ends in tragedy. Aristotle once noted that stories were all about how men should live their lives. M. Amin does not play the role of a moralist. He has opted for an objective point of view by using dramatic irony where the audience is one step ahead of the characters; the characters do not know what the audience knows. This technique invites the audience to see themselves in the characters on the screen. Would they choose to be like these embittered men and flawed women? The past needs to be left behind in order to embrace a better present. M. Amin invites us to reflect upon these issues through his cinema.

CONTRIBUTOR

Hassan Abd Muthalib

President of the Animation Society of Malaysia, this multi-award winning artist, writer and producer has put his touch to films, animations and documentaries. He also sits on various advisory panels for Malaysian and international film festivals, such as the Pyongyang International Film Festival.

¹ Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle, Hassan Abd. Muthalib. 2013:75.

² Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle, Hassan Abd. Muthalib. 2013:47.

³ This writer can attest to Hsu's knowledge of cinematic storytelling. The writer was involved in the making of commercials together with Hsu in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1970s and early 80s in Kuala Lumpur (as well as with M. Amin in the 1990s).

⁴ Nostalgia Film Melayu Klasik, Johari Shariff & Ubaidullah Mustaffa, FINAS, Kuala Lumpur. 2009:136.

⁵ Ibid, p.135.

⁶ *Film Noir* by Alain Silver and James Ursin, 2004:15.

⁷ This is cinematically alluded to the grim shadow of the village healer as she prepares medicine in the kitchen given by Long Daik for Kuntum.

⁸ This is borne out in the screenplays of three Hollywood films: *Braveheart* (1995), *The Gladiator* (2000) and *Road to Perdition* (2002). Neither of the protagonists heed the mentors and so are doomed to meet their fate at the end.

⁹ This aspect caught the attention of Malaysia's noted filmmaker, U-Wei HajiSaari, who credits CDM as the inspiration for his seminal debut film, *Isteri, Perempuan dan Jalang (Wife, Woman and Whore)*, 1993. The scene of women washing by the river parallels the one in Amin's film, and is obviously a homage.

¹⁰ Strangely, her pregnancy is never mentioned until after the traditional healer appears to treat her.



Hand-painted poster for *The Lion City*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

THE LION CITY

Chinese Translation of Film Title: 狮子城



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

Director: Yi Shui
Year: 1960
Produced by: Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd
Main Cast: Pan En (Lian Tong Seng),
 Orchid Wong (Wong Ting Ming)

The Lion City (狮子城) in Chinese and "Kota Singa" in Malay tells the love story of Feng Ling, a rubber packer at a factory, and Shao Ming, who is the manager of the rubber factory. When Shao Ming learns that Feng Ling is the daughter of Cheong Ah Choy, he approaches Feng Ling and the two become friends and fall in love with each other. Their relationship goes through many challenges, bringing them apart for some time but, fate brings them back together in the beautiful *The Lion City*, with consent from their parents to get married.

The Lion City is the first Chinese film produced by Cathay-Keris in post-war Singapore. The film is highly valued today for its scenic panoramic shots of Singapore in the 1960s, as well as its references to the political conditions of the time. It is one of the few Chinese films shot from a Chinese perspective during a time when Malay films dominated the industry. The film premiered on 6 December 1960 at Cathay Organisation's Odeon Theatre. Among the guests of honour were then Yang di-Pertuan Negara Yusof bin Ishak and his wife. The premiere was held in aid of the National Theatre Fund.

Original Copy

易水与《狮子城》

许维贤（南洋理工大学中文系）



Hand-painted poster for *The Lion City*. Photo: Hao Meng Art Studio

一、《狮子城》：标示新加坡的改朝换代

易水原名汤映乾，又名汤伯器（Tang Pak Chee），出生于马来西亚霹靂州，一生辗转于新马泰之间，生前是新加坡公民，在泰国去世（马伦1991: 401-402）。易水当年动用国泰克里斯（Cathay Keris）机构的约十万元拍摄《狮子城》。（Barnard 2009: 67）易水在决定开拍《狮子城》之前已做了大量的准备工作。他连续七、八年和国泰机构属下的淡边尼律克里斯片厂创办人何亚禄（Ho Ah Loke）讨论拍摄马来亚化（以下简称“马化”）华语电影的条件：其一、必须具备本土的演员；其二、必须要有马来亚化的剧本；为了达到第一项条件，国泰机构在1957公开在新马各大报刊招考华语演员，主办演员训练班，培养本地演员。《狮子城》的女主角胡姬等人，还有新加坡著名剧场导演郭宝昆，最初也出自这个训练班。为了让演员得以实习，他们在新加坡和吉隆坡公开巡回演出话剧《大马戏团》，得到新马观众热烈的回响。易水也从1950年代初即开始构思与编写数个马来亚化剧本（易水1959: 62-64）。

易水对马化华语电影的开拓，引来外界的质疑和嘲弄。他不但对这些批评一一做了响应，亦把这些批评者的文章收录进1959年出版的《马来亚化华语电影问题》。面对舆论压力，再加上又是首次把他的马化电影概念付诸于实践，易水执导《狮子城》时抱着只许成功，不许失败的心态。他耗费了将近一年才把《狮子城》拍完。电影未公映，市场已售卖各种电影宣传物品，例如主题曲和插曲的马化唱盘。拍摄期间，导演和演员频繁接受媒体访问之外，演员们也主动在报刊连载拍摄期间的记录手记，让读者跟进拍摄进度。本土出版的《电影周报》为了宣扬马化电影，要求来函索取香港明星玉照的读者改变念头：“不拟寄赠香港影星的照片，而欲以胡姬小姐的玉照取代之，理由是：我们既富有马来亚意识，就必须爱护具有马来亚意识的华语电影《狮子城》女主角”（马化影1960a: 1）。

《狮子城》于1960年底公映，宣传空前轰烈，大小报刊几乎均以大字体标语概括电影主题“首部马化华语片：描写新加坡由殖民地走上自治”（佚名1960b）。最让人兴奋的是把当年新加坡自治政府的李光耀总理伉俪和元首伉俪请来作戏院的座上宾。当时这并不叫人感到惊奇。在《狮子城》之前，国泰机构已协助人民行动党拍摄新闻纪录片，例如《我们的部长》。国泰机构的职员，下至易水，上至总经理汤贺治（Thomas Hodge），一直以来与政府官员频密互动。《狮子城》更是看似迈向「政治正确」的「半纪录性质的剧情片」（麦欣恩2009: 184）。电影企图反映1958至1959年新加坡人民日常生活的改变，时代幕后的推动手是以人民行动党为主导的政治大选。这从易水为《狮子城》订下的主题已看出端倪：“表现在旧政府时代的人民生活的沦落糜烂而至达到自治政府时代，人民生活的向上和争取进步”（易水1960a: 2）电影进行到大半，在时针的响动中，镜头特写从一个标志着划时代的时钟，镜头渐

渐从上到下移动到一架特地被搬到客厅中央的收音机，奏告人民行动党在1959年大选的凯歌，一对夫妇欢喜歌颂“改朝换代”。紧接着镜头一转，出现一群警察查封弹子台和禁唱电唱机咖啡店的镜头，因为这些咖啡店被指责以弹子台和电唱机作为噱头，引诱青年男女在咖啡店调情和赌博。电影再现了这些1960年代以后在新加坡不复再现的咖啡店最后一景，例如那些弹子台和吃角子电唱机，均无法在日后的新加坡咖啡店看见，《狮子城》无意中却保存了这些咖啡店历史影像的最后挽歌。

二、易水：早期独立电影的先行者及其成败

易水《狮子城》的得失成败，当时报刊已有诸多讨论。如果单从票房价值来看，《狮子城》的成绩尤其标青，一连先后在四间新加坡戏院放映十天，在马来亚各地戏院放映九天。当时有论者认为单凭这些票房表现已优于港制的中国国语片。它不但比尤敏的《快乐天使》、叶枫的《喋血贩马场》、林翠的《碧水红莲》之卖座为佳，即使最叫座的林黛片子，也要略逊一筹。1960-61年间香港片厂生产总共293部电影（Jarvie 129），这些电影最少一半的市场在新马，可见当时竞争激烈，一部影片如能连续放映五天，即被视为表现良好了，更何况放映九、十天。

但观众对《狮子城》的艺术表现评价不一。《南洋商报》特地选出四篇有褒有贬的来稿（佚名1960c: 19）。署名林鹤李的观众指出《狮子城》三大优点：一、取材现实；二、制作严肃；三、富有马化意识；缺点却有五项：一、故事繁杂；二、剪辑欠佳；三、技术未到水平；四、演员表演欠佳；五、主题不明确。（林鹤李1960: 19）另一位来稿者方亮和龙沙一致认为电影配乐很令人满意，方亮觉得观赏《狮子城》后，他开始相信两点：本地有足够技术人才和会演戏的演员，不过他批评《狮子城》拍摄大选的报道：“戏中人物口口声声说什么工会云云，未免有吹拍讨好之嫌，令人感到反胃”（方亮1960: 19）。这些来稿中，其中署名连思澜的批评最具杀伤力，他批评易水的艺术修养不够、剧本太简单、人才的缺乏和设备的简陋，都不是理由。连思澜当年认为法国新浪潮的导演们，跟易水一样没有导演经验，他们有些人的条件也不比新加坡的导演来得好，但他们却拍出了《断了气》（À bout de souffle）和《四百击》（Les quatre cents coups）这些享誉国际的电影（连思澜1960: 19）。

当年易水连续写了两篇文章反驳上述的批评。易水重复举出当时叫座的票房价值，来证明它是成功的。不过他也很清醒自道：“卖座不一定是好片，好片并不一定卖座”（易水1960b: 18）。易水自嘲《狮子城》“不太象样”（易水1960a: 2）、“非常幼稚”（易水1960c: 17），还能引起大家热烈的讨论已经是他最大的收获了。易水仅是不同意林鹤李把《狮子城》说成是主题不明确，他强调这部电影的主题是“以转运及树胶加工工业为经济中心”（易水1960b: 18），而不是林鹤李所以为男女主角的恋爱结婚。至于剧中人物努力参加工会，易水认为那是反映“今日新加坡的现实”，否认有“吹拍”之嫌。易水对连思澜的批评，反应比较激烈，认为连思澜的批评在吹毛求疵，属于“恶意看法”。易水认为《狮子城》与法国新浪潮电影，并无任何适当的可比性。在易水看来，法国新浪潮电影是“世界电影”，已具备“世界水平”（易水1960c: 17），而《狮子城》只是本土还在探索的马化华语电影。当年就有论者为易水抱不平，尤其不苟同连思澜的观点：

一些影评家却把它与世界水平相较量，这就不免令人难以服气了，须知《狮子城》是首部马化华语片，谈水平，它大可与那些在本地拍制的片子比，若然，《狮子城》这部马化华语片，至少是比《蕉风椰雨》、《幸福之门》，甚至《娘惹与峇峇》、《风雨牛车水》好得多了，因为它到底是符合了本邦人才，本地拍制的马来亚化条件。（马化影1960d: 1）

连思澜是当代著名专栏作家蔡澜，蔡澜写这篇影评当时不到20岁，在日本大学艺术学部攻读电影科编导系，有机会多方观察1950年代刚刚崛起于法国的新浪潮电影。反观在当时的新马戏线被第一世界的好莱坞电影和香港电影绝对垄断的时期，恐怕没有多少新马观众能有机会在戏院观赏上述第二世界的新浪潮电影。易水第三世界电影的写实主义路线，看似满足不了新一代文艺青年的审美需求。我认为选择第三世界电影的写实主义路线，不是因为这些第二世界的新浪潮电影没有走进他的视野，而是因为他个人及其所处的第三世界国家争取独立的马来亚化氛围。易水深知自己的电影理论和实践还存在落差，在承认自己还在探索的同时，也挑战连思澜拍摄马化华语电影。

易水在拍完《狮子城》后没有直接再得到国泰机构继续鼎力支持马化华语电影。易水只能联合同仁筹组独立制片公司“电影世纪制片有限公司”（Era Moriz Co, Ltd），继续实践他的理想。值得注意的是，这次易水自称是“独立制片，并系在独立性质之片厂摄制”（易水1963），这让他成为早期新马独立电影的先行者之一。易水在拍摄《黑金》期间还没正式离开国泰机构。虽然《黑金》是交由国泰发行机构之国际影片公司发行，不过这次易水有更多自主权。

《黑金》成功公映后不久，易水和国泰机构分别在1963年6月1日《南洋商报》第八版，刊登易水正式脱离国泰机构的离职启事。同版下面亦刊登易水新片《文冬山的月亮》和《小寡妇》在新加坡开镜的“招待报界启事”。这两部电影均在马来亚电影企业有限公司（Malaya Films and Investments, Ltd.）的旗帜下进行拍摄，外景分别在马来亚的文冬和福隆港（Fraser's Hill）完成拍摄，内景则在新加坡的南方制片厂进行。该公司曾在马来亚巴生“购取十英亩之地为建筑本邦电影城之基地”（田灵1963: 33）。广告标语标榜此电影公司“真正属于民众所有：电影占现代人民的文娛的地位，更有关文化教育之发展，所以它不该被控制被垄断甚至利用为牟利的工具。本公司则为本邦唯一而纯粹为民众所有之电影制片公司，不单资本完全由民众购股而集成，即董事亦由全体股东之民主意志而产生，皆为知名及能为本邦电影文化致力之热心人士”（33）。虽然《文冬山的月亮》和《小寡妇》的电影拷贝已失传，但从这间电影公司的广告文案看来，易水和一批本土新马电影工作同仁为了摆脱第一世界电影文化产业霸权与控制，自身融资筹办民间电影公司，拍摄独立电影，并誓言“希望用最低的条件由初步做起来实现我们崇高的理想”（33），易水的独立电影理想已在这里表露无遗。



Photo: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

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¹ 此书是全球第一本以“华语电影”（Chinese-language Cinema）为书名的书。有关该书论证，参见许维贤2011:43-46。

² 包括「各部部长政要等数十位」，参见佚名1960a。

³ 易水于1957年的国泰演员训练班，邀请当时星加坡政府教育部常务次长李绍茂主讲一课「马来亚文化」（易水1959: 72）

⁴ 蔡澜的弟弟蔡萱回忆：“二哥以连思澜笔名写影评，当时一位导演易水先生拍了两出本地电影，二哥下笔评得好差。父亲与易先生相识，两人相遇，父亲忙向易水先生道歉”（蔡萱 2005: 3）。蔡澜父亲即蔡文玄，早年是新加坡邵氏片场的干事，而邵氏机构一直是国泰机构的主要竞争对手。

Translated Copy

THE LION CITY

By Yi Shui

Article By **Xu Wei Xian**

(Nanyang Technological University Department of Chinese Language)



Hand-painted poster for *The Lion City*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

CHAPTER 1

THE LION CITY: SIGNIFYING THE CHANGE OF ERA IN SINGAPORE

Yi Shui, originally named Tang Huan Qian, also known as Tang Pak Chee, was a Singaporean born in Perak, Malaya. He spent his life shuttling between Singapore, Malaya and Thailand, and passed away in Thailand (Ma Lun 1991:401-402). At that time, Yi Shui deployed \$100,000 of Cathay-Keris organisation's fund to produce the movie *The Lion City*. (Barnard 2009: 67) Before Yi Shui decided to produce *The Lion City*, he did a great deal of preparation work. He was in discussion with Ho Ah Loke, the founder of Cathay Organisation subsidiary Keris Film Studio, for seven to eight years. They discussed the conditions for the "Malayanisation" of Chinese movies, the first being the need for local actors. The second condition is the need for a "Malayanised" script. To achieve the first condition, Cathay Organisation advertised casting calls in major Singapore and Malaya papers for Chinese actors, while organising training classes to nurture local acting talents, such as Orchid Wong, the female lead and other actors from *The Lion City*, as well as Kuo Pao Kun. To allow students to gain practical experience, organisers staged performance tours in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur for the drama "The Big Circus". The performance received overwhelming response from audiences in the two cities. Yi Shui also started conceptualising and writing numerous "Malayanised" scripts from the early 1950s (Yi Shui 1959:62-64).

Yi Shui's attempt to develop "Malayanised" Chinese movies was met with initial skepticism and ridicule from the public. Besides issuing blow by blow rebuttals, he also recorded these critical viewpoints in "The Problems of Malayanised Movies", a book he published in 1959.¹ Faced with immense public pressure, as well as the prospect of realising the vision of his Malayanised scripts for the first time, Yi Shui adopted a zero tolerance for failure approach towards *The Lion City*. He spent almost a year filming *The Lion City*. Before the movie's debut, the market was already swamped with all sorts of related merchandise, such as "Malayanised" recording of its theme song and music tracks. During the filming process, besides frequent media interviews granted by the director and the cast, actors also proactively published handwritten notes of their filming experience to allow readers to keep track of the movie's progress. To show its

support, local magazine "Movie Weekly" even tried to change the minds of readers who wrote in to request for photos of Hong Kong actors by persuading them to go for leading actress Orchid Wong's photo instead, with the argument one should support the female lead from the "Malayanised" movie Chinese-language movie *The Lion City* to display our "Malayanised" consciousness ("Malayanised Movies 1960a:1).

The Lion City was publicly screened at the tail-end of 1960 and received unprecedented publicity. Major papers and tabloids headlined the theme of the movie: "The First Malayanised Film - An illustration of Singapore's Journey from Colonisation to Independence" (Anonymous 1960b). The most exhilarating part was the presence of VIPs that included the then Prime Minister of Singapore Mr Lee Kuan Yew and his wife, as well as Head of State Yusof bin Ishak and his wife.² Before *The Lion City*, Cathay Organisation had already assisted the People's Action Party to produce news documentary, such as "Our Ministers".³ Cathay Organisation staff, from Yi Shui to General Manager Thomas Hodge, has always been in close terms with the government officials. As such, *The Lion City* seemed like a step towards a politically correct half-documentary drama (Mai Xin'en 2009:184). The movie attempted to reflect the change in Singaporean's daily life from 1958 to 1959. The seed of change was sown by the general election led by the People's Action Party. This can be seen from the theme that Yi Shui planted for *The Lion City*: "Under the old governance, people's lives were in the doldrums. Only until independence, did the people's lives improved and progressed" (Yi Shui 1960a:2). Halfway through the movie, with the clock ticking in the background, the camera zoomed in on an epochal clock. The camera panned in an up-down manner and moved to a radio that was specially placed in the middle of the living room. The radio played the songs of triumph that announced the People's Action Party's victory in the 1959 general elections, with a couple happily singing the song, *Change of Era*. Subsequently, the scene turned to a group of policemen sealing off pinball gaming and restricting patronage to phonograph coffee shops because these coffee shops were accused of using pinball and phonograph as gimmicks to lure youths to the shops to flirt and gamble. The movie also displayed shots of these coffee shop scenes that disappeared since 1960, such as pinball games and jukeboxes. *The Lion City* unintentionally retained the swan song of these historical coffee shop images.

CHAPTER 2

YI SHUI: PIONEER OF EARLY INDEPENDENT MOVIE AND HIS ACHIEVEMENTS / FAILURES

The success and failure of Yi Shui's *The Lion City* was extensively discussed by the media at that time. Looking at box office alone, *The Lion City* delivered outstanding results. It was screened at four Singapore theatres consecutively for 10 days in a row, and at various Malaya cinemas for nine days. At that time, some commentators felt that solely based on box office results alone, this movie was already better than Hong Kong produced Chinese films. It sold more seats than Lucille You Min's *Happily Ever After*, Julie Ye Feng's *Time is Running Short*, Jeanette Lin Tsui's *The Red Lotus*. Even Linda Lin Dai's blockbuster films were one notch below. From 1960 to 1961, Hong Kong film studios produced a total of 293 movies (Jarvie 129). At least half of these movies were marketed in Singapore and Malaya, an indication of the intense competition in the industry. A film to be screened consecutively for five days was deemed to be well-received. What more one that was screened for nine to ten days.

However, the audience could not agree on the artistic performance rating of *The Lion City*. Nanyang Shang Pau specially selected four articles contributed by readers that sang praises and criticised the movie (Anonymous 1960c:19). An audience who signed off as Lin He Li pointed out that *The Lion City* had three strengths: 1. Realistic theme; 2. Stringent production; 3. Full of Malayanised concept. However, its five weaknesses were: 1. Complicated plot; 2. Film editing was far from ideal; 3. Filming technique below par; 4. Actors' performances not up to standard; 5. Theme lacked focus. (Lin He Li 1960:19). Other contributors Fang Liang and Long Sha unanimously agreed that the movie soundtrack was up to expectation. Fang Liang felt that after watching *The Lion City*, he began to believe two things: there were sufficient local technical talents and gifted actors. However, he criticised the election coverage in *The Lion City*. He said, "The characters in the show kept saying that there were a lot of workers' unions everywhere, inevitably making people feel that they are trying to get into the good books of the union. How disgusting" (Fang Liang 1960:19). Amongst these contributing articles, contributor Lian Si Lan's comments were most critical. He commented that Yi Shui's artistic accomplishments were less than satisfactory, and went on to say that a script that the combination of a weak script, the lack of talent and rundown facilities, were not acceptable excuses for his failure. Lian Si Lan felt that the French directors that were in fad at that time also lacked directing experiences like Yi Shui. While some of their qualities were not as good as Singapore directors, they still managed to produce critically acclaimed international works like *À bout de souffle* and *Les quatre cents coups* (Lian Si Lan 1960:19).



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Cathay-Keris Films Pte Ltd

Yi Shui consecutively wrote two articles to rebuke the abovementioned criticisms. Yi Shui repeatedly raised the movie's spectacular box office result as testament to its success. Despite this, he was very clear-minded about a film's worth and said, "Films that do well at the box office may not necessarily be a worthy film and the converse was also true." (Yi Shui 1960b:18) Yi Shui self-effacingly reflected

that although *The Lion City* was "too preposterous" (Yi Shui 1960a:2) and "too childish" (Yi Shui 1960c:17), it was still able to generate an overwhelming amount of discussion, making this his greatest achievement. He did not agree with Lin He Li that *The Lion City* was unfocused with regards to its theme. He emphasised that the movie was about presenting the *The Lion City* as a centre of logistics and rubber processing industry (Yi Shui 1960b:18), and not what Lin He Li perceived as a love story revolving around the leading male and female characters. As for the characters who strived to join the workers' unions, Yi Shui felt that this reflected the "realistic situation of contemporary Singapore", and denied it was an effort to endorse any ideals. Yi Shui was however, particularly defensive towards Lian Si Lan's comments. He felt that Lian Si Lan was being picky and deemed him as having an acrimonious attitude. Yi Shui felt that compared to the films of the French New Wave, *The Lion City* was in a different league altogether. From Yi Shui's point of view, the French films were "international movies" that possessed "world class standards" (Yi Shui 1960c:17), while *The Lion City* was a local "Malayanised" Chinese movie that was still in its infancy stage. Back then, there were quite a few contributors who felt for Yi Shui and disagreed strongly with Lian Si Lan:

Some film critics compare it to other world class standard films. This will make people feel indignant because *The Lion City* needs to be recognised as the first "Malayanised" Chinese film. Hence, in terms of standards, it could be more appropriately compared to other locally shot films, such as *Malayan Affair*, *Door of Prosperity*, or even *Nonya and Baba*, and *Rainstorm in Chinatown*. This is because this was a film that was made up of local talents and produced locally according to Malayanised conditions. (Malayanised Movies 1960c:1)

Lian Si Lan was the contemporarily renowned columnist Cai Lan.⁴ Cai Lan was barely 20 years old when he wrote this piece of film critique. He was studying Film Directing at the Japan University of Technology and had the opportunity to study the wave of French films that just started a new trend in the 1950s. On the contrary, the then movie industry in Singapore and Malaya, which was dominated by First World Hollywood and Hong Kong movies, left audiences with little chance to appreciate the abovementioned Second World new wave of movie genre. Yi Shui's Third World movie followed the line of a realistically themed concept, which failed to satisfy the new generation's demand for artistic aesthetics. I felt that the choice of a Third World movie as the main concept theme was not because Yi Shui could not appreciate the new wave of French movies but more so he was living in a Malaya environment where Third World countries were fighting for independence. Yi Shui was aware that there was a gap between his own theoretical and practical movie philosophy, and admitted that he was still exploring the movie genre, while at the same time challenging Lian Si Lan to produce a Malayanised Chinese-language movie.

After the filming of *The Lion City*, Yi Shui did not receive strong support from the Cathay Organisation to produce "Malayanised" movies. In order for Yi Shui to continue to pursue his artistic ambition, he could set up an independent film company, "Era Movie Co. Ltd" with fellow industrial peers. What is worth noting was how Yi Shui proclaimed this to be an "independent film production, which was of an independent nature" (Yi Shui 1963). This made him one of the pioneers of the early Singapore-Malaya independent movie industry. When Yi Shui was making *Black Gold*, he had yet to leave Cathay Organisation officially. Although *Black Gold* was distributed by the international film arm of Cathay distribution organisation, Yi Shui had more autonomy this time.

Not long after the successful screening of *Black Gold*, Yi Shui and the Cathay Organisation separately published on the 8th edition of *Nanyang Siang Pau* on 1 June 1963 to announce that Yi Shui would officially be leaving Cathay Organisation. On the same page below the announcement was the notice of Yi Shui's new films *The Moon on*

Bentong Hill and *Little Widow* lensing ceremony in host of the press. These two films were produced under Malaya Films and Investments, Ltd. The outdoor scene was filmed at Bentong and Fraser's Hill in Malaysia, while the indoor scene was taken at Nusantara Film Studio in Singapore. This Company once "acquired 10 acres of land to construct a state film studio headquarter" at Port Klang in Malaya (Tian Ling 1963:33). The advertisement slogan boasted this film company as a "people's asset: movies played a part in contemporary people's lives and contribute towards the development of cultural education. As such, it shouldn't be controlled or monopolised, or even be perceived as a lucrative object. This company was the only film production company that existed for the people. Not only did the funds come from shares sold to the public, even the Board of Directors were voted by the public shareholders and were formed by public figures who were capable of contributing passionately towards growing the local movie industry" (33). Although all film traces of *The Moon on Bentong Hill* and *Little Widow* have been rendered lost, we could see from the print advertisements of this film company that Yi Shui and a group of local Singapore and Malaya film-makers managed to break off the control of the hegemony of First World movie cultural products through ploughing personal investments into a people's film company that produced independent films and vowed to "realise our noble ideals with the lowest barriers to entry" (33). Yi Shui's idealistic hopes for the film industry were apparent.

CONTRIBUTOR

Xu Wei Xian

With a PhD degree from Peking University, the specialist on gender and sexuality in Chinese literature and culture has been published in some of the top cultural studies journals. He also co-wrote and published the book, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, which discusses the corporeality and ethics of Chinese cinema.

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¹ This book is the first book in the world that centres on the theme of "Chinese-language Cinema". Regarding this book's argumentation, please refer to Xu Wei Xian 2011:43-46.

² Includes "Various Ministries' Ministers That Stands at 10 Over Officials". Please refer to Anonymous 1960a.

³ Yi Shui invited Lee Shao Mao, the erstwhile Permanent Secretary of the Singapore Ministry of Education to lecture on a class on "Malayanised Culture" (Yi Shui 1959:72).

⁴ Cai Lan's brother, Cai Xuan recalled, "Second brother wrote movie commentaries under the pen name of Lian Si lan. At that time, there was a director, Mr Yi Shui, who produced two local movies and was badly criticised by second brother. Father was an acquaintance of Mr Yi Shui and when they met, father apologised profusely to Mr Yi Shui" (Cai Xuan 2005:3). Cai Lan's father, Cai Wen Xuan worked at Shaw Organisation during his early years. Shaw has always been a stiff competitor of Cathay Organisation.



Hand-painted poster for Patah Hati. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

PATAH HATI

Literal English Translation of Film Title: Broken Hearted



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Shaw Renters Pte Ltd

Director: K.M. Basker
Year: 1952
Produced by: Malay Film Productions (Shaw Brothers)
Main Cast: P. Ramlee, Neng Yatimah, Musalmah

Kassim (P. Ramlee) returns to Singapore after finishing his studies in London and is thrust into a betrothal with the daughter of his father's benefactor, Salmah. However, Kassim has already met and fallen in love with someone who shares his interest in Persian poetry. She is Rahimah, a flower salesgirl in Singapore. They go on dates to the nursery, and spend time together (dancing) in a paradise-like garden (Alkaff Gardens). Even after Kassim returns to Kuala Lumpur to work in his benefactor's rubber plantation, he never forsakes Rahimah and has a rendezvous with her in Singapore when the opportunity arises. Together again, they watch movies at the Rex Theatre, and vow to get married.

Unfortunately, Kassim's father insists on him marrying his benefactor's daughter, Salmah, who is a rich and cultured girl. Kassim decides to fulfil his father's death wish and marries Salmah. Eventually, fate brings Kassim to reunite with Rahimah again in their twilight years.

Patah Hati was filmed around various locations in Singapore such as Kallang Airport, Rex Cinema (Mackenzie Road) and Alkaff Gardens (off Upper Serangoon Road).

PATAH HATI

By K.M. Basker

TOGETHER IN LIFE AND DEATH

By Hassan Abd Muthalib



Hand-painted poster for Patah Hati. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

INTRODUCTION

Almost immediately after the Second World War, feature film production began in earnest in Singapore. The first film was *Seruan Merdeka* (*Cry of Freedom*, 1946) directed by B.S. Rajhans who had made the first Malay film, *Leila Majnun* (*Love-struck Leila*) back in 1934. The Shaw Brothers established a studio system and kick-started the Malay film industry with *Singapura Di Waktu Malam* (*Night Time in Singapore*, B.S. Rajhans, 1947). The Shaws also brought in directors from India. In 1952 K.M. Basker, a native of Kerala, was contracted by the Shaws.

Basker grew up and studied in Malaya while staying with his uncle. He was familiar with local customs and mannerisms that helped him stand in good stead in his directorial days. Basker's first film in Singapore was *Patah Hati* (*Broken-hearted*), with P. Ramlee and Neng Yatimah in the lead roles. Basker was lucky to work with the talented duo for his debut Malay film. Ramlee had honed his skills, first in small roles, before moving on to lead roles. Neng was known as the 'Queen of Tears' because of her ability to shed tears easily on set. The story of *Patah Hati* certainly needed such ability! In the film, the stars brought an appropriate element of naiveté to their roles as star-crossed lovers who had to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. The beguilingly simple script with its focus on their emotional attachment to each other also contributed to that. The story and screenplay of *Patah Hati* was written by Basker. Jamil Sulong who was also the assistant director, wrote the dialogue. Cinematography was done by Chow Chan Hock from Hong Kong.

PREMISE, STORY AND SCREENPLAY

The premise of *Patah Hati* is about two people who vow to be together in life and death but are forced to separate, with the hero finally marrying another. It recalls some of the early classics of Hollywood. Stories then were simple, bordering around the main characters, without sub plots and following a linear trajectory. The focus of *Patah Hati* is on the two main characters and their emotions.

The film begins with Kassim (P. Ramlee) returning from London after his studies. On a shopping errand in Singapore, he falls in love at first sight with a flower salesgirl, Rahimah (Neng Yatimah) who shares

**“ Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits---and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire! ”**

– The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám
(Edward Fitzgerald's Translation)

his interest in poetry. They go on dates to the nursery and spend time together dancing in a paradise-like garden and make a vow to be together forever. But fate has other plans in store for Kassim. He departs reluctantly for Kuala Lumpur with his father, Hassan (Ulung Jawa) to attend a party hosted by a rich businessman Mr. Sidek (Mohd. Hamid Yusof). To Kassim's consternation, Mr. Sidek announces that Kassim will be engaged to his daughter, Salmah (Musalmah). In a confrontation with his father, Kassim is shocked to find out that Mr. Sidek was the benefactor who put him through his studies and had also paid for Hassan's medical expenses when he was ill. Kassim, being a filial son, has no choice but to agree to the marriage.

Kassim is unable to return to Singapore as Mr. Sidek wants Kassim to take over his business immediately. Kassim sends many letters to Salmah but they are all intercepted by his father. One day, Mr. Sidek sends Kassim to Singapore on an errand. On his arrival, the exuberant Kassim rushes to meet Rahimah and finds out that she has never received his letters.

He promises her that they will marry the very next day. After he leaves, his father appears at Rahimah's doorstep, requesting her to make a sacrifice for Kassim and his future. She dutifully agrees and promises to leave Singapore. Kassim is devastated to find Rahimah gone the following day. Unable to trace her whereabouts, he marries Salmah and has a son, Yusof (Ahmad Chetti).

Twenty years passed and Kassim is now a sullen, brooding man who is prone to sickness. Kassim meets Rahimah, their love is rekindled and he marries her. Neighbours begin to gossip about their relationship, and the news reaches Salmah's ears. Salmah and son come to the conclusion that Rahimah has married Kassim for his wealth. Kassim flies into a rage and reveals the truth. He pleads with Salmah to accept Rahimah as a sister, and Yusof to accept her as his mother. Due to the exertion, Kassim suffers a heart attack and dies. His son Yusof goes to meet Rahimah and she receives him as her son. However, she is devastated to hear of Kassim's death and dies. Kassim and Rahimah's vow to live and die together has run its course.

The story appears to be inspired by romantic plots that were popular with audiences of Bangsawan (Malay opera). Some examples of these stories are *Sakuntala* from India, *Laila dan Majnun* from Persia and *Romeo and Juliet* from the West. Basker also featured Edward Fitzgerald's romantic translation - *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* in the film. The book is read by Rahimah when she meets Kassim for the first time, and later by Kassim.

There are no villains in the story; the stumbling blocks to Kassim and Rahimah are Kassim's father, Hassan, and Salmah's father,

Mr Sidek. Mr. Sidek is a traditional man as seen from his frequent utterance of his father's words. He financed Kassim's education and paid for Hassan's medical bills, but does not ask for repayment.

Hassan does not see himself as an obstacle to Kassim's happiness but as someone who must fulfill the promise made to a benefactor. Mr. Sidek and Hassan's characters are revealed only through their dialogue. For Kassim and Rahimah, we see their character emerge and crystallise through actions, emotions, songs, dialogue and body language¹.



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Shaw Renters Pte Ltd

SONGS, ACTING AND PERFORMANCE

Song and dance were the sine qua non of early Malay films. This influence came from the Bangsawan plays that would always include a number of song and dance sequences. It was characteristic of the Malay culture³. There are eight songs involving the main characters in Patah Hati.

1. A song by Salmah as she sings to Kassim's portrait, full of hope, in anticipation of Kassim's arrival.
2. Kassim and Rahimah lie in bed in their respective houses, pining for each other. In a dream song sequence where they are dressed like newly-weds.
3. Kassim and Rahimah dance to music in a park.
4. Kassim, after being introduced to Salmah, sings a sad song in his room. The scene is intercut with Rahimah singing in her house in Singapore.
5. Kassim, in his room, sings a sad song after being forced by Mr. Sidek to take over the business immediately.
6. Rahimah sings a sad song in the park where she and Kassim danced, to rekindle memories before she leaves Singapore for good.
7. Salmah sings a song to her child in the crib. In a montage, we see the baby growing up into a teenager.
8. Yusof, Kassim's son, now a youth, jives and sings.

Basker also kept to the convention of a song in the first minute of the film⁴. It was discovered much later that the first song by Salmah is part of the set up for the story. Kassim fantasises that he and Rahimah are married in the second song. At the end of the song, he turns into a demon and threatens Rahimah. He brushes against a torch and falls with his body on fire. The ending foreshadows Kassim's feeling of being 'inhuman', leaving Rahimah without a word.

The third song sees Kassim and Rahimah dancing in the park; a manifestation of their deep and innocent love. The setting of grassy slopes and trees mirrors the illustrations done by Edmund Joseph Sullivan for Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*. When Rahimah decides to leave Singapore, she returns to the same place for one last time to relive that memory with a sad song. When Rahimah returns with a sad song, the art direction is different. There are gnarled trees and tree stumps, and some shots are empty to indicate the emptiness Rahimah feels without Kassim beside her. Basker also skillfully uses dramatic irony to show how Kassim and Rahimah miss meeting each other. As Rahimah leaves the park in a car, Kassim's car arrives. And in one long shot, we see Kassim running around desperately looking for Rahimah while her car moves off in a distance.

P. Ramlee and Neng Yatimah's performance evoke the right emotions. Basker also deliberately kept the supporting roles on a lower key. An interesting observation of Salmah's character is that she does not fly into a rage when she discovers Kassim has married another woman. That is an expected reaction of a Malay woman then, especially one from the upper class. Basker wants the audience to piece the story together. Towards the end of the film, Kassim tells Salmah that he has done everything for his family and now wants to pursue his own happiness. This is the reason for Salmah's calmness: she has no complaints about Kassim as he has never neglected the family.

A stellar performance by P. Ramlee is displayed in the scene where his father pleads with him to marry Salmah. Cornered by his father's pleas, Kassim gives in to his father. Consciously avoiding melodrama, and in a bravura of modernist acting, he tells his father that everything is over. He says happiness means nothing to him now, and he does not mind sacrificing himself for the happiness of others. Twenty years later, Kassim sits silently as an older man, body slightly hunched and with sunken cheeks and brooding eyes. Rahimah is still on his mind.



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Shaw Renters Pte Ltd

CONCLUSION

With his very first film in Malaya, K.M. Basker brought new ideas to early Malay films. He alluded to pre-marital sex, a taboo subject at the time. After a conversation with Rahimah, Kassim invites her into the room. When Rahimah's sister arrives, Rahimah gets up from her bed, buttoning her blouse. She says Kassim is taking a shower. Not showing the sex scene was not only being mindful of the local sensitivities, but also film's focus on the genuine love between Kassim and Rahimah, not lust.

The treatment continues with the non-showing of Kassim's wedding to Salmah. A photograph of the event is displayed on a wall instead. The camera moves to Salmah and Kassim on the sofa. Kassim reads from the *Rubáiyát*:

*Don't hesitate, my love.
With you by my side, we sit under a shady tree...
with our glasses brimful, we'll start a new beginning.
We'll build a heaven of our own.*

Kassim's feelings fly. He stops and smiles but oblivious of Salmah. It is obvious that the heaven he speaks of is not with Salmah by his side but is the one with Rahimah.

Basker used a measured and methodical approach to the narrative and stylistics while being subtle and nuanced. *Patah Hati* is one of the outstanding films of early Singapore cinema.



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Shaw Renters Pte Ltd



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Shaw Renters Pte Ltd

CONTRIBUTOR

Hassan Abd Muthalib

President of the Animation Society of Malaysia, this multi-award winning artist, writer and producer has put his touch to films, animations and documentaries. He also sits on various advisory panels for Malaysian and international film festivals, such as the Pyongyang International Film Festival.

¹ Basker clearly broke the rules of scriptwriting by showing the character of Mr Sidek and Hassan only through dialogue rather than conventionally through their actions. But it was for a reason. It becomes an index to their lack of worldview; they are stuck in their own paradigm of tradition and are seen to lack humanity.

² The *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* is actually a Sufi treatise and not a book of love poems. The earliest translation was Fitzgerald's romanticised translation. He gave it a distinct fatalistic spin but softened the impact of Khayyám's preoccupation with the mortality and transience of all things.

³ For an overview, see "Chapter 1: How it all Began – 'Cinema before Cinema' " in Hassan Abd. Muthalib, *Malaysian Cinema in a Bottle*, 2013:3-26.

⁴ Kuala Lumpur's first feature film, *Abu Nawas* (originally titled *The Adventures of Ya'acub*, 1954) made by the Malayan Film Unit, relied on this convention. In the very first minute the heroine breaks into song without any motivation. This is elaborated in the article - "Winning Hearts & Minds: Representations of the Malays and their Milieu in the Films of British Malaya" by Hassan Abd. Muthalib, found in the *Southeast Asia Research Journal* published by the Royal Asiatic Society, London (March 2009). The stars and music composers were all from Singapore.



Hand-painted poster for *Taming of the Princess*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

TAMING OF THE PRINCESS

Chinese Translation of Film Title: 醉打金枝



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Mr and Mrs Chan Kam Yuen

Director: Hsu Chiao Meng (徐蕉明)
Year: 1958
Produced by: Hong Kong United Co. Ltd. (港联有限公司)
Main Cast: Xiao Lizhen (筱丽珍), Jin Shanghua (锦上花), Hokkien Opera Troupe (新麒麟闽剧团), Liu Huchen, Wu Mei Yu, Sin Kee Lin (Xin Qi Lin)

Taming of the Princess is a Hokkien period opera film based on a popular Chinese story about Tang Dynasty General Guo Ziyi's son, Guo Ai, who rebukes his wife, Princess Sheng Ping, for not attending his father's birthday celebration. Of the three local Amoy-dialect films made in the 1950s, *Taming of the Princess* is the sole surviving film made by Singapore studios. The other two films are now presumed lost.

Taming of the Princess was the first and only Hokkien (Amoy dialect) opera film wholly funded and produced by Singapore or Malaya film companies and talents. It was an unprecedented venture by local arts and cultural groups to document the vernacular Chinese traditional performing arts through cinema. The cinematic style was seemingly influenced by the Chinese traditional opera films that were imported from Mainland China and Hong Kong. It was filmed at the Keris Film Studio.

The film's actors and actresses were renowned opera singers and stage performers from the local Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe, who were widely celebrated by Hokkien opera fans in the Southeast Asian region. Discovered through a film programme put up by the National Museum Cinémathèque earlier this year, the subsequent restoration and screening will prove invaluable to our understanding and appreciation.

TAMING OF THE PRINCESS

By Hsu Chiao Meng

THE LINES THAT LEAD FROM TAMING THE PRINCESS

By Toh Hun Ping



Hand-painted poster for *Taming of the Princess*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

INTRODUCTION

Singapore had an emergent, vibrant film industry in the 1950s that was churning out 15 to 20 films a year, the bulk of which were Malay films produced by two leading film studios. The Shaw Brothers ran Malay Film Productions (MFP) that was based at Jalan Ampas. They had initiated a local Malay film production industry from as early as the 1940s. Cathay-Keris, a joint venture between tycoon Loke Wan Tho and Ho Ah Loke, was founded in 1953 and based at East Coast Road. There were also sporadic attempts to shoot Mandarin and Chinese dialect films in Singapore, usually by film production companies from Hong Kong. In a number of these ventures from overseas, local film studios were directly involved in the production, most notably Hong Kong's Shaw and Sons' *The Opera Boat in Singapore* (directed by Gu Wen-zong, 1955); the Cantonese film was shot entirely in Singapore using MFP's studio facilities at Jalan Ampas¹.

SINGAPORE ONCE PRODUCED HOKKIEN FILMS

By the mid-1950s, a trend of Amoy-dialect (Hokkien) films emerged in the cross-border Chinese film market. Between the late 1940s to '60s, more than 200 Amoy-dialect films were released, with the majority of them produced by movie studios based in Hong Kong. More than a dozen of these were partially filmed on location in Singapore and Malaya. Standing out from the torrent of Hong Kong-based productions were three Amoy-dialect (Hokkien) films that were shot entirely in Singapore and Malaya.

Wan Lee Film Company, a film production company set up by the Singapore-based Eng Ean Hokkien Opera Troupe, attempted to start the ball rolling for locally-made Hokkien films by producing *Love Deep As the Sea* (directed by But Fu, 1954). It was shot on location in Singapore and Penang by a production crew from Singapore's Nusantara Film Productions². The reception of the debut Hokkien film was good enough for Nusantara Film Productions to follow up with a

sophomore effort a year later – *Lovesickness Sent from Afar* (directed by Yao Ping and Hsu Chiao Meng, 1955)³.

Both *Love Deep As the Sea* and *Lovesickness Sent from Afar* had melodramatic narratives that were set in then-contemporary Singapore and Malaya, and dealt with somewhat modern themes. The third locally made Hokkien film was *Taming of the Princess*, a Hokkien traditional opera performed by a local opera troupe and creatively adapted into a film; the film was financed and produced by a Singapore film distribution company 'Hong Kong United Co. Ltd', directed by veteran filmmaker Hsu Chiao Meng, and released in April 1958⁴.

Of the three local Hokkien films from the 1950s, only *Taming of the Princess* is extant. The first two films are now presumed lost.

THE EMPEROR SPEAKS HOKKIEN IN TAMING OF THE PRINCESS

The film *Taming of the Princess* was based on a popular Chinese opera story about Tang dynasty General Guo Ziyi's son Guo Ai castigating his wife Princess Sheng Ping for her non-attendance at his father's birthday celebration. The Chinese title of the film literally meant 'hitting the princess while in a drunken rage'. Princess Sheng Ping and Guo Ziyi were upset with Guo Ai's disrespect towards the royalty, leading Guo Ai to be apprehended by his own father. The Emperor Tang Daizong intervened and released Guo Ai after hearing his case, and further encouraged mutual tolerance, love and understanding between the young couple.



Film-stills from *Taming of the Princess* (1958) Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection

This opera story has since been adapted into many forms (movies, television, music records) and became a regular part of the repertoires of numerous styles of Chinese opera such as Jin opera, Cantonese opera and Peking opera. In 1950s Singapore, where the majority of the Chinese were dialect-speaking, both the operatic and cinematic renditions of *Taming of the Princess* were performed using the colloquial dialect. In this case, it was Hokkien. The audience of the time often remarked, that on the opera stages in Singapore, “the Emperor speaks Hokkien!” One can say likewise for the local film version of *Taming of the Princess*, which was also noted to be the first Hokkien opera film wholly funded and produced by Singapore-Malayan film companies and talent. It was an unprecedented venture by local arts and cultural groups to document the vernacular Chinese traditional performing arts through cinema, and record on celluloid the performances of local Hokkien opera singers. The film had indeed captured an important piece of Singapore history.

RENOWNED LOCAL HOKKIEN OPERA SINGERS PERFORMED FOR THE CAMERA

The cast in the film *Taming of the Princess* were renowned opera singers and stage performers from the local Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe, who were widely celebrated by Hokkien opera fans in Southeast Asia. The leading roles were assigned to the star female opera singers from the troupe – Xiao Lizhen (acting as Princess Shen Ping), and the troupe’s leader and stage director Jin Shanghua (in a cross-gender role as the princess’ consort Guo Ai). The troupe was founded in 1937 by Singapore resident Lin Jinmei and was then known as the Geok Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe. It was the first Hokkien opera troupe to be established in Singapore that performed in the ‘Gua-a-hi’ form. The ‘Gua-a-hi’ [Hokkien pronunciation] or ‘Ge-zai-xi’ [hanyu pinyin] opera form originated in Taiwan and gained widespread popularity in Singapore and Malaya during the 1930s.

After World War Two, the former Geok Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe changed its name to ‘Sin Kee Lin’. When *Taming of the Princess* was in production, the Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe was at the height of its popularity, amongst an upswing in the traditional Chinese opera scene during the 1950s. Many opera troupes were employed to perform in the thriving amusement parks (New World, Great World and Happy World). The popularity of Hokkien opera began to wane in Singapore during the 1960s, especially with the emergence of other new and accessible forms of entertainment like television⁵.



Photographs and autobiographies of the members of Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe, as published in the Fifth Anniversary Special Publication of the ‘Entertainment’ Magazine (1950).

From right: Chen Xianyun (screenplay writer of *Taming of the Princess*), Jin Shanghua, and Lin Jinzhi (former female lead of the troupe).

Photo Credit: Su Zhangkai

TAMING OF THE PRINCESS WAS SHOT AT A FILM STUDIO IN TAMPINES

The crew and equipment for the filming of *Taming of the Princess* were loaned from the Cathay-Keris Film Studios. They utilised facilities at the Keris Film Studio at Tampines Road 9th milestone⁶. The film was shot in the studio, with props and sets resembling the decorated interiors of traditional Chinese palaces and their outdoor courtyard gardens. Opera troupe singers donned Chinese opera

costumes and make-up, and performed for the film camera in almost the same manner as they would on stage for a live audience. They sang the same Hokkien storytelling songs with lines of verse in mostly seven characters – that which was typical of the ‘Gua-a-hi’ opera form. It was not merely a ‘fixed-camera’ documentary of an opera performance. The cinematic style – a three-act dramatic structure consisting of a medley of narrative songs interspersed with spoken dialogue, use of classical continuity editing, flat lighting, painted backdrops – was seemingly influenced by the Chinese traditional opera films that were in great demand in Singapore during the 1950s. Shanghai-produced Yue opera film *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (directed by Sang Hu & Huang Sha, 1953) generated the most interest and sparked off a trend in watching opera films here⁷.

Prior to the shooting of the film, the Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera troupe had already staged *Taming of the Princess* at the Happy World Amusement Park in October 1957⁸, with a screenplay adapted from an earlier Jin opera film with a similar title, produced by China’s Changchun Film Studio and directed by Liu Guoquan; Liu’s film had screened in Singapore to popular acclaim in February 1957⁹. As early as 1948, the earlier-mentioned Eng Ean Hokkien Opera Troupe had included movie songs in their traditional opera performances¹⁰. Other active Hokkien opera troupes in Singapore of the time, such as Nan Yi Hokkien Opera Troupe and Sin Sai Hong Hokkien Opera Troupe, were regularly adapting Chinese period opera films for the local Hokkien opera stage. They were counting on the popularity of films they adapted such as *Hua Mulan* (produced by Changchun Film Studio, 1956) and *Fairy Couple* (Shanghai Film Studio, 1956) to boost ticket sales for their Hokkien operatic versions staged in the local amusement parks¹¹.

THE PRODUCTION COMPANY OF TAMING OF THE PRINCESS – HONG KONG UNITED CO.

The film *Taming of the Princess* was produced by Singapore-based Hong Kong United Co. Ltd¹². Hong Kong United was one of the established film distribution companies operating in 1950s to ‘60s Singapore. Before Hong Kong United ventured into production, their core business was to acquire Chinese dialect films produced by the Hong Kong film industry for distribution to theatres in the region. For example, they oversaw the creation and distribution of a Teochew-dubbed version of the originally Cantonese opera film from Hong Kong – *Tiger Wong Seizes the Bride* (directed by Lam Chuen, 1957)¹³. They also supported the production of two Cantonese films by Hong Kong’s Kin Shing Film Company while they were being shot on location in Singapore and Malaya – *Your Infinitive Kindness* (Kwan Chi Kin, 1965) and *Looking For Her Husband* (Lo Yu Kei, 1965)¹⁴.

By the end of 1957, Hong Kong United released the first local Hokkien opera film – *Taming of the Princess*. But there was no follow-up local dialect film production by Hong Kong United after the 6-day theatrical run of *Taming of the Princess*. Hong Kong United eventually set up an official film production arm in Hong Kong in the early 1960s. The studio was managed by former Union Film Enterprise associate Lau Fong, with star actors Miu Gam Fung and Ding Leung. It produced at least eight Cantonese films, including *Revenge of the Twin Phoenixes* (directed by Wong Toi, 1962) and *The Unbearable Sorrow* (Wong Toi and Chu Hak, 1963)¹⁵.

The managing directors of Hong Kong United Co. Ltd in the 1960s were known to be Chen Jinyuan and Hu Langman¹⁶. Chen was also a former film producer and manager of North Bridge Road’s Jubilee Theatre, where *Taming of the Princess* and most Hong Kong United-distributed films were screened. Hu was a poet, a founding editor of local newspaper Sin Chew Jit Poh, and a family relative of Tiger Balm magnate Aw Boon Haw¹⁷.

THE DIRECTOR OF TAMING OF THE PRINCESS – HSU CHIAO MENG

Prior to directing *Taming of the Princess* in 1957, Hsu Chiao Meng had been the manager of the aforementioned Nusantara Film Productions Ltd. With Nusantara, he directed at least three Malay films, at times using the pseudonym 'M. Wijaya'. He also directed two locally funded and produced Chinese films, including one that was shot at Singapore's former Nanyang University – *Door of Prosperity* (1959).

Hsu Chiao Meng, a Zhenjiang native, probably first arrived in Singapore from China in 1940 with the New China Drama Troupe. He was the in-house photojournalist, and was in charge of documenting stage performances and producing newsreels of anti-Japanese, fundraising campaigns in Singapore¹⁸. As the Japanese army began its invasion of Malaya in December 1941, Hsu joined the Singapore War-time Cultural Circle Working Group which was led by Chinese writers Yu Dafu and Hu Yuzhi. In early February 1942, Hsu joined several other members of the War-time Cultural Circle Working Group and escaped to Indonesia¹⁹.

Hsu returned to Singapore after the war and became the cinematographer for a local Chinese documentary film about the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army's (MPAJA) struggle during the Japanese Occupation – *Light of Malaya* (directed by Liu Man, 1946). This was filmed in the Malayan Peninsula and Singapore, and contained re-enacted battle scenes in Perak, acted by the MPAJA soldiers themselves²⁰. Hsu then joined a local Chinese drama troupe, the 'Singapore Experimental Drama Troupe', until it was disbanded at the end of 1946²¹, and was the manager of the Film Distributing Department of United Enterprises Ltd until February 1948²². After his stint at directing films with Nusantara in the early 1950s, Hsu Chiao Meng briefly returned to being a cinematographer, for a Hong Kong Cantonese film partially shot on location in Singapore and Malaya – *Malaya Love Affair* (directed by Tsi Lo Lin, 1954). He also joined Cathay-Keris Films as a cinematographer in late 1959, and participated in the filming of Yi Shui's famed 'Malayanised' local Chinese-language film *The Lion City* (1960)²³. Following which he became the 'Jurukamera' (Director of Photography) for no less than ten Malay films by Cathay-Keris, some of which were well-known works by acclaimed directors, such as *Hang Jebat* (Hussein Haniff, 1961) and *Chuchu Datok Merah* (M. Amin, 1963).

From 1961, he was also the Vice-Chairman and Head of Film Department of the newly formed Singapore Film and Drama Institute²⁴. He later moved to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to set up an advertising film company, and likely returned to Singapore for retirement by the mid-1990s²⁵.

* Special mention must be given here to Mr. Su Zhangkai, who first discovered and pointed out in 2009 that the Singapore-produced *Taming of the Princess* was in the collection of the Hong Kong Film Archive.

I also wish to extend my gratitude to Mr. Wong Han Min and Mr. Koh Eng Soon for kindly providing crucial images and information about the film, Sin Kee Lin Hokkien Opera Troupe and Hong Kong United Co. Ltd.

Further thanks to Mr. Salleh Sariman and Mdm Choo Lian Liang for sharing images and information about Hsu Chiao Meng, the "forgotten" veteran of Singapore cinema.

CONTRIBUTOR

Toh Hun Ping

Toh Hun Ping is a video artist and film history researcher. His video works have screened at international experimental film festivals and were presented in art venues both as video installations and live-performance projections. In preparation for a new video work, he is researching into the history of film production in early-mid 20th century Singapore. He also finds time to blog at sgfilmlocations.com and sgfilmhunter.wordpress.com, both websites about film locations in Singapore.



Handbill of *Taming of the Princess* (1958). Photo Credit: Wong Han Min

¹ Nanyang Siang Pau. 5 October 1955, p. 8 (in Chinese).

² Nanyang Siang Pau. 14 September 1953, p. 5 (in Chinese).

³ Nanyang Siang Pau. 13 November 1955, p. 3 (in Chinese).

⁴ Nanyang Siang Pau. 10 November 1957, p. 8 and 5 April 1958, p. 8 (in Chinese).

⁵ Chen Geng (ed.), Volume: Writings on Hokkien 'Gua-a-hi' Opera, Beijing: Guang Ming Ri Bao Chu Ban She, 1997, pp. 85, 134-135 (in Chinese).

⁶ Yi Shui, On Issues of the Malayization of Chinese-language Cinema, Singapore: Nanyang Yin Shua She, 1959, pp. 122-123 (in Chinese).

⁷ Kwok Lok Hui, Light and Images Fifty Years of Chinese Motion Pictures, Hong Kong: MCCC Creations, 2005, p. 57-59 (in Chinese).

⁸ Nanyang Siang Pau. 2 October 1957, p. 7 (in Chinese). 9 Nanyang Siang Pau. 21 February 1957, p. 7 (in Chinese). 10 Nanyang Siang Pau. 13 October 1948, p. 6 (in Chinese). 11 Nanyang Siang Pau. 20 May 1957, p. 7, and Nanyang Siang Pau. 2 February 1958, p. 10 (both in Chinese).

¹² Not to be confused with a Hong Kong film company 'Xianhe ganglian gongsi', which was originally named 'Ganglian' (Hong Kong United) as well. It was established in 1961 and specialized in producing Cantonese wuxia (sword-fighting) movies, some of which were also distributed by Singapore's Hong Kong United Co. Ltd.

¹³ Nanyang Siang Pau. 14 February 1957, p. 8 (in Chinese).

¹⁴ Nanyang Siang Pau. 18 August 1964, p. 13 (in Chinese).

¹⁵ Nanyang Siang Pau. 15 July 1963, p. 8 (in Chinese).

¹⁶ Nanyang Siang Pau. 6 August 1963, p. 5 (in Chinese).

¹⁷ 'Poems and Articles by Hu Lang Man'. Web. www.hulangman.com

¹⁸ Choo Lian Liang, Chasing Rainbows, Singapore: Lingzi Media, 2010, p. 79-81. See also Nanyang Siang Pau, 3 August 1940, p. 22 and 13 August 1940, p. 22 (in Chinese).

¹⁹ See note 18, p. 108-113.

²⁰ Zhu Xu, Drama and I, Singapore: Seng Yew Book Store, 1987, p. 126-127 (in Chinese).

²¹ Nanyang Siang Pau, 15 September 1970, p. 13 (in Chinese).

²² The Straits Times. 28 February 1948, p. 2. See also Nanyang Siang Pau, 26 February 1948, p. 2 (in Chinese).

²³ Nanyang Siang Pau. 5 December 1960, p. 13 (in Chinese).

²⁴ Tan Kong Peng (ed.), Singapore Film and Drama Institute Inauguration Souvenir, Singapore Film and Drama Institute, 1961 (in Chinese).

²⁵ Jamil Sulong, Kaca Permata: Memoir Seorang Pengarah (Glass Jewel: Memoir of a Director), Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, 1993, p. 217-221 (in Malay).



Hand-painted poster for *Ninaithale Inikkum*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

NINAITHALE INIKKUM

Literal English Translation of Film Title: Sweet Memories



Photo Credit: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Premalaya Productions

Director: K. Balachander
 Year: 1979
 Produced by: Premalaya Productions
 Main Cast: Kamal Haasan, Rajinikanth, Jayaprada

The film tells the story of Chandru, a singer who is touring Singapore with his band where he meets his love interest Sona only to find that she is terminally ill. The movie takes a turn when Chandru finds out about Sona's cancer and decides to grant her final wish of performing on stage with his band. The film ends on a tragic note with the lady's demise.

Ninaithale Inikkum was filmed around various locations in Singapore such as Paya Lebar Airport, Mount Faber, Orchard Towers and the Singapore River.

NINAITHALE INIKKUM

By K. Balachander

SWEET MEMORIES

By S A Nathanji



Hand-painted poster for *Ninaithale Inikkum*. Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio

SYNOPSIS

A four-man band consisting of Chandru (Kamal Haasan), Deepak (Rajinikanth) and two other musicians goes on a tour to Singapore. Chandru meets his enthusiastic fan Sona (Jayaprada) again, and falls for her.

Little does Chandru realise that Sona is trailing them to retrieve a packet of contraband she secretly planted in Chandru's guitar when she met Chandru in Chennai. Sona is blackmailed by a gang of smugglers in Singapore. She has to help them retrieve their valuable packet or her father will be harmed. Fearing for her father's safety, she tries to get closer to Chandru to retrieve the packet.

Chandru's bandmate Deepak receives a recorded message from a secret admirer (Geetha) and embarks on a search for this girl in Singapore. Just as Deepak is about to give up his search, he runs into Geetha coincidentally. He learns of the painful truth that Geetha is actually mentally unstable and she has a habit of sending recorded messages to many celebrities. Heartbroken, Deepak decides to return to his country.

As love blossoms between Chandru and Sona, Sona decides to break the bad news and tells Chandru that she is terminally ill with cancer. Despite knowing that Sona is ill, Chandru proposes to her and seeks her father's approval for her hand in marriage. Fearing that the gang members may cause harm to his family, Sona's father lies to Deepak that Sona is engaged to someone else.

Sona fulfils her wish of performing with Chandru's band. With blessings from their families, Chandru marries Sona. She passes away shortly after her marriage. Chandru makes up his mind to remain widower and treasure the sweet memories (*Ninaithale Inikkum*) he shared with Sona for his lifetime.

PERFORMANCE

The cast of *Ninaithale Inikkum*'s superb performance in the film is clearly evident. The director's brilliant effort in bringing out the best from the artistes is commendable. The confluence of some of the best in the Tamil film industry made *Ninaithale Inikkum* one of the more impressive works of its time.

The director made the movie a musical, comedy, love story and suspense thriller, all at the same time. He had also done an excellent job in the film which is one of the highlights of the movie.

What has also made this movie special is Singapore's old world charm. Places featured in the film include the former National Theatre, Jurong Hill and its surroundings, Sentosa, the old City centre, the Cavanagh Bridge, the Singapore River, the Botanic Gardens, Mount Faber, Paya Lebar Airport and Orchard Towers. These places were exquisitely photographed and choreographed beautifully in the film. Most of these places may have developed and changed drastically after more than 30 years. Some have disappeared completely.

Award-winning cinematographer, the late B S Lokenath did a marvellous job capturing the sceneries and presenting them in a spectacular manner. Lokenath received the best cinematographer of the year (1979) Tamil Nadu State Government's award for his work in *Ninaithale Inikkum*.

The story is written by one of the most prolific writers of Tamil films, the late S Sujatha. The mellifluous music was brought together by award-winning music director, the late M S Viswanathan is another highlight of this movie and the story is written by one of the Tamil films prolific writers, the late S Sujatha.

NINAITHALE INIKKUM WAS DIGITALLY RESTORED AFTER 35 YEARS IN 2013 AND SCREENED IN SOME 100 THEATRES ACROSS TAMIL NADU.

K BALACHANDER – DIRECTOR

K Balachander who is also known by his honorific names - KB Sir and Iyakumar Sigaram (pinnacle of director), was a legendary movie and stage director, screen writer and producer who had directed more than 150 films of different genres and languages. During the nearly five decades of his career, he won nine national film awards, including the Dadasaheb Phalke Award (named after the Father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke) which is India's highly respected life-time achievement award for film personalities. He was also the recipient of several Film Fare and State government awards.

Balachander's first love was stage and drama. He gave life to plays like *Ethir Neechal (Against the Current)* and *Server Sundaram* which were made into movies in later years.

The first movie that he directed was *Ethir Neechal* in 1968. His other more memorable movies included *Arangetram*, *Aval Oru Thodar Kathai*, *Naan Avan Illai*, *Apoorva Raagangal*, *Avargal*, *Moondru Mudichu*, *Varumayin Niram Sivappu*, *Thaneer Thaneer*, *Achamillai Achamillai*, *Sandhog Bhairavi*, *Marathi Uradhi Vendome* and *Unna Mudiyum Thambi*. He also directed Bollywood box-office movie *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* starring Kamal Haasan and Rati Agnihotri.

He had also introduced many new faces to the Tamil cinema, including superstar Rajinikanth, megastar Kamal Haasan, Nagesh, Major Sundarajan, Sreekanth, Vivek, Prakash Raj, music director V Kumar and many others.

KAMAL HAASAN – LEAD ACTOR

Kamal Haasan started acting as a child. He also worked as a choreographer and assistant director before he got his first break as a full-fledged actor. Kamal Haasan is also a screenwriter, director, producer, singer and lyricist. He is one of the few actors in India who has received the most awards in his acting career. Kamal Haasan received India's prestigious Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan Awards in 1990 and 2014 respectively.

Kamal Haasan went on to become a mega star of Indian cinema, second only to the great actor, the late Sivaji Ganesan.

His memorable movies include *Moondru Mudichu*, *Avargal*, *Manmadha Leelai*, *Oru Oodhappu Kan Simittugiradhu*, *Varumayin Niram Sivappu*, *Raaja Paarvai*, and many others.

He developed one of his most memorable stage performances with his group of 50 performers at the Singapore Indoor Stadium in 1993 to a sell-out crowd of 12,000.

RAJINIKANTH – CO LEAD ACTOR

Rajinikanth made his debut in Tamil films in K Balachander's *Apoorva Raagangal* in 1975. Rajinikanth got his first full-fledged role as hero in director J Mahendran's *Mullum Malaraum* in 1978. He had a cult-like following among Tamil film fans all over the world. Rajinikanth's popularity stems from his larger-than-life super-hero portrayal in many films. Another reason for his popularity is the witty lines he delivered in his movies, which captivate the audiences. He is one of the highest paid actors in Asia in his time. He has won several awards for his excellent acting. In 2014, Rajinikanth was conferred the Centenary Award for Indian Film Personality of the Year at the 45th International Film Festival of India.

Some of works include *Bhuvana Oru Kelvikkuri*, *Billa Murattu Kaalai*, *Pokkiri Raja*, *Thanikattu Raja*, *Naan Mahaan Alla*, *Moondru Mugam*, and *Netrikan*.

JAYAPRADA – LEAD ACTRESS

A 14-year old Jayaprada was talent scouted by Telegu character actor Prabhakar Reddy in 1976 at a school event. She had her first break in Telegu's film *Bhoomi Kosam* in a three minute dance sequence. This proved to be a turning point in her film career and she went on to star in many South Indian and Bollywood films. She gave a stellar performance in the 1981 thriller *47 Naatkal (47 Days)* starring debutant Telugu actor Chiranjeevi. The movie was directed by none other than K Balachander.

Some of Jayaprada's more memorable movies were *Devude Digivaste*, *Naaku Swatantram Vachindhi*, *Seeta Kalyanam*, *Antuleeni Katha*, *Siri Siri Muvva*, and *Sargam*.

VISWANATHAN – MUSIC DIRECTOR

Viswanathan is also known as MSV and by his honorific name Mellisai Mannar (The King of Light Music). He has composed more than 1200 songs and music for Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam movies for the past six decades. His disciple and keyboard player in his music orchestra Ilayaraja went on to become the Music Maestro of Tamil movies.

In the 50s and 60s, Viswanathan partnered T K Ramamoorthy to compose some of the most memorable songs of their time. He was awarded the title Thirai Isai Chakravarthy (Emperor of Cinema Music) and presented with 60 gold coins and a new car by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 2013.



Photo Credits: Asian Film Archive Collection, courtesy of Premalaya Productions

CONTRIBUTOR

S A Nathanji

Nathanji has over 25 years of journalistic experience as a writer, columnist, publisher, managing editor and author.

In 1987, Nathanji took over the helm of the *Indian Movie News (IMN) Magazine*, which is the oldest Indian cinema magazine in the world.

He is also the author of the 320-page book in hardcover and colour – *My Memoirs: My Unbelievable Journey with Indian Cinema* which was launched in March 2014 by Singapore's 6th President, Mr S R Nathan.

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“我非常喜爱绘画电影画布。它是一种艺术，我这辈子都会继续为艺术而绘画”

Ang Hao Sai, 洪豪狮



Photo Credit: Channel NewsAsia - Lost: Cinema

RECREATING HAND-PAINTED MOVIE POSTERS



Photo Credit: Channel NewsAsia - Lost: Cinema

Spotlight on Singapore Cinema also celebrates the iconic hand-painted movie billboards that were ubiquitous in the golden age of Singapore cinema. To bring back the cinema-going experience of the 1950s to 1970s, Mr Ang Hao Sai, one of the surviving artisans of the movie-poster painting trade, recreated the posters of the five films screened at the Capitol Theatre as part of SG50 celebrations.

Mr Ang says passionately “I will keep painting until I can’t do it anymore. This is an art form of Singapore”.

“硕果仅存画师洪豪狮再次手绘传统电影画布”

25 May 2015, zbNOW pg 5,
“Painter Mr Ang recreates hand-painted movie posters”

“为夕阳行业生色 电影画布业梦不落”

25 May 2015, Shin Min Daily News pg 19,
“The art of hand-painted movie posters will stay forever”



Photo Credit: Hao Meng Art Studio



Photo Credit: Capitol Theatre

CAPITOL THEATRE: SINGAPORE'S ICONIC CINEMA LANDMARK REINVENTED

First built in 1929, Capitol Theatre was the premier picture house in Singapore, screening countless blockbusters for decades until its last movie screening in 1998. The iconic building was also popular among couples who had their first dates at the Magnolia Snack Bar in the nearby Capitol Building.

Today, the new Capitol Theatre, pays tribute to its glorious past with its neo-classical architecture and entrance. With 900 luxuriously-appointed seats and the proscenium stage, flanked by grand sculptures, the theatre brings back an old-world splendour for premier theatrical, cinematic and musical events.



Capitol Theatre at the junction of Stamford and North Bridge Roads c. 1958.
Photo Credit: National Archives of Singapore.



Photo Credit: Channel NewsAsia - Lost: Cinema

SUPPORT THE PRESERVATION & RESTORATION OF SINGAPORE'S CINEMATIC HERITAGE

Films uniquely capture a society's social memory and Asian films regularly win international accolades as a special showcase of Asian talent and identity. **More than 400 films were made from the 1950s - 1970s in Singapore. However, a significant number of these films have been lost and those that still survive, need funding in order that they can be preserved, maintained, digitised and restored.**

To quote what Oscar-winning filmmaker Martin Scorsese said on the urgency of preserving our cinematic heritage: "...films have the ability to tell us who we are... there's [still] a race against the clock to save what we can."

The Asian Film Archive (AFA) is honoured to partner the Media Development Authority to present four restored film titles spanning 1952 – 1963, as part of Singapore's SG50 celebrations - Spotlight on Singapore Cinema. The AFA digitised, restored and subtitled *Chuchu Datok Merah*, *The Lion City*, *Taming of the Princess*, and *Patah Hati* from the sole surviving film print copies of these films.

The AFA hopes to dynamically reach out to the community and is collaborating with many other agencies to bring the films to different community spaces locally and internationally.

The AFA preserves films and makes our collections available for public reference to ensure future generations have access to these films. We hope to encourage an appreciation for Singapore and Asian Cinema in a vibrant and enjoyable way through our curated educational and cultural programmes.

In light of the growing urgency to save at-risk films of new and old Asian cinematic gems, it is paramount for the AFA to sustain a judicious acquisition programme to preserve and restore these works.

Your support will go a long way to maintain and safeguard Singapore and Asia's rich film heritage. The AFA is an Institution of Public Character (IPC). Cash donations in Singapore entitle donors to receive tax deductions. To donate a gift in support of the AFA's work, write to us at info@asianfilmarchive.org or donate via the give2arts.sg portal.

About the Asian Film Archive (AFA)

The AFA is an organisation that preserves Asia's rich film heritage in a permanent collection focusing on culturally important works by independent Asian filmmakers. It promotes a critical appreciation of Asia's cinematic works through organised community programmes. A subsidiary of the National Library Board, the AFA is home to the works of award-winning Asian filmmakers like Lino Brocka, Lav Diaz, Tan Chui Mui, Kirsten Tan, amongst others. It also has in its holdings the *Cathay-Keris Malay Classics* that have been inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Register, a list of endangered library and archive holdings.

Presented by:

Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA)

The Media Development Authority of Singapore promotes the growth of globally competitive film, television, radio, publishing, games, animation and interactive digital media industries. It also regulates the media sector to safeguard the interests of consumers, and promotes a connected society. MDA is a statutory board under the Ministry of Communications and Information. (www.mda.gov.sg)

Singapore Film Commission (SFC)

Singapore Film Commission was formed in 1998 and is part of MDA since 2003. The SFC is made up of an advisory committee comprising 15 members from the film, arts and cultural community, and is supported by a Secretariat within the MDA. The SFC has, over the years, supported more than 600 short films, scripts, feature films, as well as film-related events in Singapore that showcase homegrown talent and works.

Asian Film Archive (AFA)

The Asian Film Archive is a subsidiary of the National Library Board. It preserves the rich film heritage of Asian Cinema, encourages scholarly research on film, and promotes a wider critical appreciation of this art form. (www.asianfilmarchive.org)

National Archives of Singapore (NAS)

Established in 1968, the National Archives of Singapore is the official custodian of Singapore's archives of national or historical significance; covering both government and private records. The NAS acquires, preserves and presents archival records in all formats including documents, photographs, maps, oral history interviews and audio-visual recordings. The holdings date back to the early 19th century and allow for the discovery and recollection of decisions, actions and shared memories of Singapore, its government and the people. Since 2013, the NAS has been an institution of the National Library Board. (www.nas.gov.sg)

National Museum of Singapore (NMS)

With a history dating back to its inception in 1887, the National Museum of Singapore is the nation's oldest museum with a progressive mind. Its galleries adopt cutting-edge and multi-perspective ways of presenting history and culture to redefine conventional museum experience. A cultural and architectural landmark in Singapore, the Museum hosts innovative festivals and events all year round. The National Museum of Singapore re-opened in December 2006 after a three-year redevelopment, and celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2012. (www.nationalmuseum.sg)

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The Ministry of Communications and Information oversees the development of the infocomm technology, media and design sectors; the national and public libraries; as well as Government's information and public communication policies. It is MCI's mission to build a nation of connected people and achieve a better quality of life. This is achieved by developing vibrant infocomm, media and design sectors, cultivating learning communities and fostering an engaged public. (www.mci.gov.sg)

CAPITOL THEATRE

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