SINGAPORE CINEMA

New Perspectives

Edited by Liew Kai Khiun and Stephen Teo

ROUTLEDGE

Singapore Cinema

This book outlines and discusses the very wide range of cinema which is to be found in Singapore. Although Singapore cinema is a relatively small industry, and relatively new, it has nevertheless made an impact, and continues to develop in interesting ways. The book shows that although Singapore cinema is often seen as part of diasporic Chinese cinema, it is in fact much more than this, with strong connections to Malay cinema and the cinemas of other Asian nations. Moreover, the themes and subjects covered by Singapore cinema are very wide, ranging from conformity to the regime and Singapore's national outlook, with undesirable subjects overlooked or erased, to the sympathetic depiction of minorities and an outlook which is at odds with the official outlook.

The book will be useful to readers new to the subject and wanting a concise overview, while at the same time it puts forward many new research findings and much new thinking.

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In memory
Toh Hai Leong (21 March 1956–15 January 2014)

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Foreword

Watching Singapore films as national duty

Chua Beng Huat

Growing up in the 1950s in Bukit Ho Swee, an *attap*-house community at the edge of the colonial city that was Tiong Bahru, I had very easy access to movie theatres. Closest was the King's Theatre at Kim Tian Road; and within walking distance was the Great World entertainment park which housed the Sky Theatre and the Atlantic Theatre. The Oriental Theatre and the Majestic Theatre in Chinatown, which screened Mandarin movies and occasional Hokkien-dialect films, were only a 5 or 10-cents bus ride away. Coming from a small-business family, I always had discretionary cash to go to the movies. The price of a ticket for the Saturday or the Sunday morning matinee was 50 cents, and that for regular afternoon or evening screenings were 1 dollar for seats closer to the screen, or 2 dollars for the back rows, and up to 2.5 dollars or 3 dollars for "circle" seats on the second floor. Until today, I cannot bear to sit in the front half of the movie house. The ticket prices at each theatre were determined by whether it was air-conditioned and whether it had plush "velvet" seats or thin plywood seats, which were often infested with bed-bugs.

The first morning matinee would start at 9am, the second at 11am. I would regularly sit through both movies, usually at King's, if I were on my own; but frequently, I went with my elder sister to see Mandarin movies at the Oriental or the Majestic. I was quite indifferent to what was showing but they were generally Hollywood westerns with cowboys and "Indians" or Hong Kong melodramas from Shaw Brothers or the Great Wall Studio. By the time I started secondary school, the movie theatres of choice were the Capitol, Odeon and the Cathay in the vicinity of North Bridge Road, all within walking distance of each other. Hanging out after school, one activity was sitting through a 3pm screening in any one of these cinemas. All these "downtown" cinemas screened Hollywood movies, and beyond the action movies, the films were mostly incomprehensible to me but it almost did not matter. Movies were one of my major leisure activities. Meanwhile, unknown to the boy who spent so much time in movies was the fact that there was a movie production studio making Malay-language films. I do not remember at all watching any "Singapore" movies.

Then, in 1995, came Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, a film that foregrounds the "underbelly" of successful Singapore. This was followed by Jack Neo's *Money No Enough*, which transformed the everyday grumblings of Singaporeans into

a social critique laced with humour. Under the political conditions of the time, all professional associations (such as the Law Society) were legally constrained to stay within their narrow professional interests and civil society organisations were constantly at risk of being de-registered. Aesthetic cultural practices, such as caricature drawings and theatre performances, carried a disproportionate social responsibility to critically reflect on the social and political conditions, in spite of the fact that such practices were subject to state censorship on different grounds. Films are no exception. This continues to be true, as in the most recent banning of Tan Pin Pin's film, *To Singapore with Love* (2013) for commercial release, while the fate of Eric Khoo's most recent "erotic film", *In the Room* remains in limbo at the time of writing.

In any case, since the mid-1990s, Eric Khoo has become the renowned auteur whose films are "must see" for the arthouse crowd, while Jack Neo's output based on a one-film-a-year production schedule has been hugely popular with large numbers of Singaporeans who come to see and laugh at themselves being "caricatured" on the big screen. Perhaps the success of Neo and Khoo at both ends of the movie spectrum engendered a sense of filmmaking as a "viable" if unstable profession and "persuaded" liberal-minded middle-class parents to permit their children to go to film schools. A short string of filmmakers with their breakthrough first films followed: Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Chan with *Eating Air* (1999); Royston Tan with *15* (2003), the short and long versions; Boo Junfeng with the banned short-film *Tanjong Rhu* (2009) and his feature film *Sandcastle* (2010); and in the documentary field, Tan Pin Pin's *Singapore Gaga* (2005). These filmmakers and their works stand as evidence and affirmation of something called "Singapore Cinema". But this cinema has a disrupted history. If one were to cast a glance backward in Singapore film history, we may discover the "Golden Era" of the Malay film studios and its films, which remain mostly unrecognised, therefore compelling a need to reconnect with this history. So we now have a discontinuous history, a constellation of recognised filmmakers from our contemporary era, who, in spite of their relatively young age are "pioneers"; a National Film Commission that provided public funding; and, with recent academic analyses of the history and the filmmakers and their work, including this collection of essays, all the essential elements constitutive of Singapore Cinema and a "film industry" now in place, ready for further development. For myself, watching Singapore films has become something of a "national" duty, regardless of what the reviewers say. And, I urge all Singaporeans who are into movies to do the same, lest the fledgling industry fizzles out, again, for lack of audience, and the same tragic history of discontinuity may be re-enacted twenty-five years from now.

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Introduction

Liew Kai Khiun and Stephen Teo

The small nation state of Singapore, fifty years old in 2015, has generally stimulated interest in its style of governance and economic management, but not so much in its arts and culture. This new volume of essays is an attempt at redressing the tendency to neglect more serious discussion on Singaporean arts and culture, particularly its film culture. It is a contribution to a small but growing literature on Singapore cinema. The volume is the result of a workshop held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in October 2011. Since then, it would be true to say that Singapore's film culture has clocked some significant new achievements in the form of more landmark productions impacting the film community in Singapore and the world. As 2015 marks Singapore's 50th year of separation from the Malaysian Federation, the Golden Jubilee was dubbed "SG50" in the mainstream media, and film was one of the key media tools mobilised to mark this commemorative year. While SG50 demonstrates the extent to which Singapore has grown and matured as a nation state, and the country rallies its filmmakers to celebrate the commemoration, it brings attention to the fact that Singapore did not have a film industry for the first twenty-five years of its existence as an independent state. Singapore's most immediate interests were focussed on nation building, the economy, industrialisation and urbanisation. It was not until the early 1990s that filmmaking came to be recognised as an industrial and artistic enterprise worthy of development in a new country. Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and the Jack Neo comedy *Money No Enough* (1998) were milestones in this emerging film culture and industry. Though the industry is very small by comparison to those in other Asian countries, it is vibrant, diverse, contrasting, and not without contradictions and paradoxes – very much like Singapore itself. As a major global city in Asia, Singapore films attract attention in the same way as its other achievements in business and governance; but perhaps more than any other sector of industry, Singapore cinema genuinely reflects the cultural state of the country. The city-state thrives on its inter-Asian mixture of Chinese, Indians, Malays and Eurasians living together on a small island. Singapore cinema reflects the strengths of this multiculturalism (and multiracialism), which needs to be more celebrated than it is, if it is to be understood in its proper context.

One of the oft-stated axioms about Singapore is that it is a clean but sterile city-state, its people pliant and conformist, and its culture heavily subjected to the

censorious hand of the state. However, as demonstrated in this volume, Singapore films are far from sterile, pliant or conformist. They offer a vision of the country that is much more complex than is otherwise thought. As Singapore cinema is not a conception entirely constructed by government officials or ministers, unlike the city-state itself, the idea of a Singapore cinema must be examined more closely in connection with civil society. However, rather than suggesting that the cinema is entirely infused with criticisms of the state, this implies Singapore films are much richer in content, and filmmakers function in their capacity to critically observe the hopes and despair of modern Singaporeans. Singaporean films display a range of genres from comedy to tragedy, social melodrama to documentary, and horror to action; such a range reflects the spectrum of emotions and thoughts. Therefore, Singapore films are both expressions of its people and its artistes.

The view of a tightly controlled Singapore with its filmmakers eagerly conforming to government control and censorship is outdated and critically untenable. Singaporean filmmakers know that Singapore cinema must also function as a national cinema; and recent developments of the ties between filmmakers and the state surrounding the SG50 celebrations show the evolving sophistication of the relationship between the cinema and the state, despite the occasional lapses where the state resorts to heavy-handedness. As filmmakers adhere to benchmarks and yardsticks, and conform to mainstream values, this ultimately shows the national and social significance of Singapore films. While the artistic standards of Singapore films are occasionally recognised by international film festivals, there are patterns and principles in the filmmaking that are not often taken into account when we think of Singapore cinema. If we adhere to the view that Singapore cinema virtually sprouted from nowhere in the 1990s, it has etched a very distinctive character over the last two decades, and it has produced some memorable works in that period for a young cinema. The perception that its filmmakers (most of whom were born in the post-independence era) were hard put to express themselves freely is not borne out by the empirical evidence of the films. Singapore films are definitely worthy of scholarly review. Filmmakers inscribe critiques into their films more than we think. Such critiques need to be excavated and opened to scrutiny.

In the years since our workshop in 2011, a consensus between filmmakers and the state apparatus revolving around the politics of history, memory and remembering has developed. All these factors were behind the SG50 commemoration. If the relationship between the filmmakers and the state was characterised by the politics of public morality in the 1990s and early 2000s, the period of the Golden Jubilee celebrations was marked by the negotiations around the politics of the past. The demands of wholesomeness framed in the protection of the "cultural and familiar values" of the "conservative heartlands", particularly in the area of sexual identity and gender concerns, have not ebbed at the point of this publication. Among the more prominent cases in recent years is Ken Kwek's *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* (2012), a work that was almost completely banned days before its first screening because complaints were made about its seemingly offensive sexual and racist content. As 2015 drew closer, portraying the past increasingly

became a contentious subject on which the state was keen to take control in order to shape the narrative of the past and the present, rather than leaving it purely to the imaginations of the filmmakers.

For Singapore cinema, the prequel to the celebratory mood of SG50 came in 2013 with Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*. This was a narrative about a Filipina domestic worker employed by a Singaporean family who are themselves struggling to keep up their middle-income lifestyle. The film is set in the 1997 Asian financial crisis. It bagged the Caméra d'Or award at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, in addition to winning four out of six nominations at the Golden Horse Film Awards later that same year, including the Best Picture – a rare honour for a Singapore production. *Ilo Ilo* brought Singapore cinema to unprecedented heights in the international film circuit, and with it, a new level of recognition for local directors. Within the realm of popular culture, Jack Neo's three instalments of *Ah Boys to Men*, released between 2012 and 2015, found a commercially lucrative model of cooperation with the government in its nationalistic, yet tongue-in-cheek, vision of military service that Singaporean citizens are compelled to undertake upon reaching the draft age. With a totally new corps of young artistes who gained their limelight from the social media, the trilogy was generously supported by the military and the government, including the unprecedented use of the city's downtown area as a war zone. The box office returns for Neo's trilogy even outperformed that of Hollywood blockbusters in Singapore.

Away from the commercial cineplexes, prominent Singaporean filmmakers have also been leaving their mark albeit through commissions from the state to produce short films to front SG50 projects. This included Boo Junfeng's *Things That Make Us, Us* which launched the whole project, and Royston Tan's *Old Friends*, made for the nation-wide Singapore Memory Project (SMP) film festival. Tan had earlier made two other works in the same vein, *Old Places* (2010) and *Old Romances* (2011), commissioned by the Media Development Authority (MDA) and released on television. Emphasising the affective dimensions of nostalgia, heritage and communitarian bonds in the otherwise ordinary "heartlands" (the public housing estates in which the majority of the population live), the commissioned works of Boo and Tan fitted well with the efforts of the state to merge the "hardware" of the prosperous cityscape with the "heartware" of its citizenry. Nonetheless, in the same way that the state claims to protect public morality and "family values", it also shows the same fervour towards ensuring the dominance of its foundational myths. Apart from commissioning and funding films, the MDA also functions as the state's regulatory body overseeing censorship, and has consequently often been in dispute with artistes and filmmakers, particularly when they are perceived to question or challenge some of the foundational myths. A case in point is Tan Pin Pin's *To Singapore with Love* (2014), discussed in Loh Kah Seng and Kenneth Paul Tan's chapter in this volume. Tan's film has been effectively banned from public screening. A documentary told from the perspectives of Singaporean leftwing activists living in exile in Southern Thailand and Malaysia as well as in Europe and America, Tan's film has obviously touched a raw nerve on the politics of the past, from the government's

perspective. Viewed as a "revisionist history", the restriction placed on the film serves as a sign that the authorities and local filmmakers may not share the same politico-cultural trajectory even as filmmakers (including Tan Pin Pin herself) are mobilised to celebrate SG50.

The film community's assertion of its artistic autonomy was perhaps reaffirmed over the tributes paid to film critic turned independent filmmaker Toh Hai Leong, who died on 15 January 2014 at the age of fifty-eight after battling diabetes for close to a decade. Although known as an eccentric, Toh's commitment to Singapore's film culture was undeniable, and the cinema fraternity has acknowledged this. His only film, *Zombie Dogs* (2004), portrayed the psychopathological dimensions of anomie and alienation in Singapore. Even though censors and cinema operators did not endorse it, it was critically acclaimed for its raw and unrestrained cinematic treatment of that which Toh saw as the zombified, tranquilised citizenry of Singapore.

As it unfolded, the year 2015 became highly significant; first, for the outpouring of public sorrow in the week-long funeral for former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 23 February 2015; and second, for the commemorative events marking SG50, climaxing in the largest National Day Parade on 9 August 2015 that the nation had ever seen. Banking on the public mood, the People's Action Party (PAP) government called a general election in September 2015, and was ultimately rewarded with a landslide victory of 69.9 per cent of the popular vote – a result that surprised even the ruling party who had expected further backlash from simmering public frustrations over several pressing issues such as the high cost of living, immigration and public transportation woes.

In this respect, Singapore screen culture came to mirror the developments taking place on the political front of the Golden Jubilee celebrations and Lee's passing. Beginning with his 90th birthday in 2013, a series of commemorative books and documentaries on Lee Kuan Yew were produced by both state and private initiatives, obviously foreshadowing the eventual demise of the great man. After his death, a stage musical *LKY* was virtually rushed into production, performed by local theatre, film and television actor, Adrian Pang. The production would not have been possible when Lee was alive. The iconoclastic Lee was openly disdainful of the vanity of post-colonial leaders of his generation whose images were displayed in statues and monuments. On the cinematic front, another re-enactment of the late statesman's public persona was seen in *1965*, the first attempt at a historical epic in Singapore cinema, directed by Randy Ang and Daniel Yun. The role of Lee Kuan Yew was played by theatre and television veteran Lim Kay Tong. Barely lasting a week at the local box office after it opened before National Day, *1965* was generally perceived to be a media-historical flashbulb event marking SG50, but the critics saw it as a shallow cinematic depiction of the historic year of 1965. Lim's characterisation of Lee Kuan Yew was perhaps the only memorable conceit in the film, being one more in a seemingly endless inundation of images of the elder statesman in the years just before and after his passing, and fitting into the official narrative of Singapore's development "From Third World to First", to quote the title of a book of memoirs by Lee, published in