



Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts

## **DEFINING MALAYSIAN INDIE FILM**

**Yeap Swee Leong**

**Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours  
(Cinematography)  
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YEAP SWEE LEONG

This Project is one of the needs for  
Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honour  
(Cinematography)

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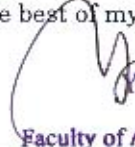
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## Abstract

The world has become different, the technology has become advanced. Costs for producing feature film became lower because of the technology. We can no longer classify Malaysia's indie film group as a low-budget filmmakers, utilize digital operator to producing film as well. Currently, even though you are making mainstream film or commercial film, the cost could be set in really low. That arouse several problems when people wanted to discuss what is Malaysia's indie film. Beside that, the definition of Malaysia's indie film has been created 10 year ago. It is the time to figure out which elements are specific and precise to find out what is a Malaysia's indie film. Researcher believed that, the definition of indie film in different country are no much different, but what we need to consider is how to differentiate it.

## Abstrak

Dunia semakin berubah, teknologi semakin canggih. Kos bagi menghasilkan sebuah filem semakin rendah disebabkan kecanggihan teknologi. Kita tidak boleh menyatakan bahawa filem indie sebagai filem kos rendah dan menggunakan peralatan digital untuk menghasilkan sesuatu filem. Hal ini demikian kerana, pada masa kini filem pada arus perdana dan filem komersial juga menggunakan kos yang rendah. Hal ini telah menimbulkan persoalan kepada semua yang ingin mengetahui apakah sebenarnya yang dimaksudkan dengan filem indie Malaysia. Selain itu, definisi filem indie Malaysia telah dicipta sejak 10 tahun yang lalu. Ini adalah masanya untuk memikirkan dan menyelidik unsur-unsur yang khusus dan tepat bagi filem indie Malaysia. Walaubagaimanapun, penyelidik percaya bahawa definisi filem indie di antara negara lain tidaklah begitu ketara perbezaannya dengan Malaysia. Namun begitu, apa yang perlu dipertimbangkan ialah bagaimana cara untuk membezakannya.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Malaysia first local film was introduced in year 1933, this film which entitled “*Laila Majnun*”<sup>i</sup> was directed by an Indian director named B.S Rajhans (Hatta, 1997: 62). Since then Malaysia cinema has went through more than eighty years of historical moment. Although the technique for producing film was late introduced in Malaysia if compared to the first film appeared in the world entitled “*Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon*” by Lumiere Brother in year 1895; Malaysia

filming industry has already been passing through three significant eras, that is from studio era, then developed to independent era, and now indie era or recently names as The Litter Cinema of Malaysia (Hassan, 2012).

Only two tycoon film companies operating in Malaysia during the studio era, that is Shaw Brother and Cathay-Keris. Both of them were the only two companies controlling three of the important aspect of cinema namely producing (produce film), distribution (to distribute it), and exhibition (to screen the film)<sup>ii</sup> (Hatta, 1997: 71). Indirectly, other companies met big problem in producing and screening their films as both of the tycoon companies were reluctant to screen the films produced by other companies (ibid., p. 71). Although only both tycoon companies competing with each other, the way they producing film still as careful as possible. This is because they want the films produced in low-budget. For instance, Malay Film Production<sup>iii</sup> tried to limit the shooting location by fully encourage film shooting inside studios. In addition, film stock cannot use over 30,000 feet for each film (Hatta, 1997: 76). Therefore, the budget for filming during that period were controlled between Rm30,000 – Rm50,000 (ibid., p. 80). Definitely, this amount of spending sound cheaper if compare to filming budget consumed nowadays. Nevertheless, we should have consider the studio era which was appeared in 1930s until 1970s. When the living standard at the moment was relatively low. In that era, the average monthly income per rural malay household was between Rm60 until Rm120 (Bahar bin Puteh

Mahadi, 1988). Through this comparison, we can easily observe how much expensive for making a film at that particular period.

Eventhough both the tycoon companies have successfully monopolized Malaysia filming industry, still they could not resist the changing of the outside world and the several problems facing by them. According to Hatta (1997), Singapore was splited from Malaysia in year 1965, the Singapore government do not ever support Malay films because the Malays population in Singapore just cover 14% of the total resident. In addition, increased in the budget for buying film stock, higher price for chemical processing, and negative influence from macroeconomics aspect: price of rubber and tin was reducing, were some of the unretarded problems. Nevertheless the most tough issue for them to confront was the introduction of Television in year 1963 (p. 100). The introduction of Television lead to Malaysia citizens to prefer staying at home rather than going to cinema for watching films. According to Hassan (2013), both the companies were close down in year 1967 and 1973 respectively (p. 75). Although Shaw Brother has short term coming back and re-handling Merdeka Production to produce film. But in the end, they still faced the fate of close down, that was because they could not afford the rapidly economic growth and change. At that time, budget for each film boosting up to around Rm60,000 to Rm90,000 (Hatta, 1997: 107).



From year 1970 onwards, Malaysia filming industry going into an independent era. Don't have any film company controlling fully all three aspects for producing film anymore, that are producing, distribution and exhibition. All the producers and filmmakers will be producing their own film in independent way without helping by big film studios. Although the studio era already over, but Shaw Bother and Cathay-Keris still occupied the two main film flow, that was both distribution and exhibition (Hassan, 2013: p. 95). Subsequently, this could be the main reason why Malaysia filming industry could not grow up. At the moment, all the financial for making films was invested by rich peoples such as Deddy M. Borhan, Dato' Syed Kechik and etc. and also funding from particular financial institutions (Mahyuddin, 2009 as cite from Yow, 2012). Beside that, the government also played their role in helping filmmakers by introducing several policies, example through New Economic Policy (NEP) to helping Malay people to escape poverty and indirectly enhance the economics power of Malay. In the NEP system, all companies registered in Malaysia should have at least 30% occupied by Malay peoples (Jomo, 2001).

However, most of the films produced after the studio era unable to reach to the professional level. Most of the films do not get any award from outside film festival, only some of the director example U-Wei get award from Cannes Film Festival for his debut feature film *The Arsonist (Kaki Bakar)* in year 1995 (Hassan, 2013: 141). Until year 2000 onward, some of the quality film had been released and

gain many award if compare to previous year. Such as Liew Seng Tat going Pusan Film Festival in year 2007 to received Audience Best Film for his debut feature film *Flower In The Pocket*. Tan Chui Mui also made her first debut film *Love Conquer All* and won Tiger award at International Film Festival Rotterdam in year 2007 (Dennis Chua, 2008). The difference between these type of filmmakers and filmmakers appeared in independent era was they are using digital camera to made films, so that the budget was really cheap. Introduction of DV camera has encouraged many of talented young filmmakers coming up to make their own films. Tilman Baumgartel (2011) said,

*“Thanks to digital cinema technology, film-makers from South East Asia have the opportunity to produce their alternative and often very personal works”*  
(p. 57).

Khoo (2010) described them as who make films in underground, low-budget, non-profit oriented and as guerrilla filmmakers. We named them as Malaysia indie filmmakers. Their film budget normally below Rm100,000 (p. 139). For example Amir Mohammad made *Lips To Lips* in year 2000 with the budget around Rm 70,000; Yasmin Ahmad filmed *Rabun* with budget Rm 80,000 (Khoo, 2007). According to FINAS official website, below are other film produced by Malaysia indie filmmakers:

Table 1: Films produced by local indie filmmakers and the corresponding spending budget.

<b>Director</b>	<b>Film</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Tan Chui Mui	Love Conquer All	Rm 30,000
Eng Yow Khoo	The Bird House	Rm 50,000
James Lee	Before We Fall In Love Again	Rm 193,000
	Thing We Do When We Fall In Love	Rm 30,000
Liew Seng Tat	Flower In The Pocket	Rm 64,000
Deepak Kumaran Menon	Chemman Chaalai	Rm 150,000
Sandosh Kesavan	Aandal	Rm 80,000
Raindog	Hoyuhang	Rm 180,000
Hidden Summer In My Heart	Felix Tan	Rm 110,000
This Longing	Azharr Rudin	Rm 100,000

According to Khoo (2010), filmmakers can carry out the film editing by using their own laptop; while camera operator can be handled by single man due to lightweight DV camera (p. 138). All the advantages of technologies lead those filmmakers able to afford the budget for making their own personal films. Technologies become more advance. In year 2013, the digital cinema (D-cinema) were being imported into Malaysia. That means, filmmakers can screen their films directly in cinema without the need to transfer from digital format to film format

anymore. Khoo (2004) said, previous filmmakers need probably Rm250,000 for translating digital format to film format.

One of the Malaysia B-movie Director M. Subash has made several horror films in Malaysia, normally he just spending few day to make the film (3-7day) (Amir, 2012). M.Subash also utilize digital camera to shoot he own film similar like Malaysia indie filmmakers. Example like his first debut film *Pensil* (2008) was done with high-definition camera and just spending Rm450,000 (Rizal Johan, 2008). Beside that, the first Chinese language film made by M.Subash was release in year 2012, that was entitled *You Believe In Ghost?*, the budget was Rm600,000 (Seto Kit Yan, 2012). Even Malaysia mainstream films also can produce on low-budget. One of the Malaysia local film has been hit super box office namely *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) by controversial director Namewee, this film was using Canon 5D mark II and the whole of the film budget was lower than Rm1,000,000 (Cleffairy, 2011).

However, the budget spending by both of the director was still more than budget spending by Malaysia indie filmmakers. Don't forget, we need to consider the budget of translating digital format to film format and some of the film was hiring famous actor as a film selling point, that is so-call star system<sup>iv</sup>. But the more important thing was the digital camera could lower the film budget. According to this trend, researchers strongly believe in the following years, all the films will be done mainly based on digital format. In another word, we no longer dictate low-budget

film as an exclusive definition for Malaysia indie films. We just can say, that is one of the element, but it is not the only one.

### **1.1 Problem statement**

The main problem triggered this research is the lacking of specific elements to define what kind of film should be allocated as Malaysia Indie Film. This is because utilisation of DV camera for filming has become famous nowadays. According to Hassan (2013), presence of both DV camera and non-linear editing software allowed many young filmmakers to make their own films (p. 159-160). This is shortcoming for Malaysia cinema, because everyone can make film. For example, one of the Malaysia Indian directors named M.Subash had produced several Mandarin horror films in low budget. Nevertheless, questions arose whether should consider this kind of films as Malaysia indie film. According to Hassan (2013), from year 2004 until 2010, Malaysia had been produce more than 40 horror movies (p. 229). This mean that averagely, 6 horror movies were produced every single year. Through this data, we can prove that horror movie was in fact categorized as mainstream film rather than indie film.

Until now, we are difficult to define the elements of Malaysia indie films. The main problem is low-budget films can representative by Malaysia indie films, Malaysia B-movies, and Malaysia mainstream films. Again, that is not because the



budget for making Malaysia indie films already increased, but rather because Malaysia mainstream films can be made in lower budget as well. Realizing this conflicting issues, there is necessary need for us to analyse and have a new criteria in order to classify Malaysia indie film.

Besides that, although Malaysia indie filmmakers have gained a lot of awards from foreign countries, especially during prestigious film festivals such as Torino, Sundance, Pusan and etc. (Khoo, 2004). Surprisingly, most Malaysia audience remains no know these films were in fact originally made by Malaysia local filmmakers. Also, even though several Malaysia indie films have been approved by Malaysia censorship agency and given chance for being screened up in Malaysia cinemas, the return of these indie films were unprofitable. Moreover, government also do not giving full support to them. Sadly, occurrence of all these problems has retarded the development of local indie filming industry.

Consequently, young local filmmakers might lost their confidence to making this kind of film in Malaysia again, in another words, there is high possibility our talented youth filmmakers will outflow to foreign state. This definitely is going to be a big loss to our country. Therefore, at this moment, the most important thing we need to do is to specifically figure out what kind of film should be categorized as Malaysia indie film before we can accurately re-introduce this kind of film to Malaysia audience.

## **1.2 Research objective**

- i.) To identify the specific characteristics of Malaysian indie films.
- ii.) To evaluate the reasons which lead to lack of support for Malaysian indie films.
- iii.) To identify the routes taken by Malaysia indie filmmakers in order to survive in local filming industry.

## **1.3 Research question**

- i.) How and from what perspectives should Malaysia indie film being defined?
- ii.) Why there is lack of supports for local indie films?
- iii.) How do the Malaysia indie filmmakers survive on their own?

## **1.4 Scope of Research**

When the filmmakers start to produce film, they need to consider three important aspect of cinema namely production, distribution and exhibition. Higson had mentioned before, we are no longer dictated to national cinema only in term of production, both distribution and exhibition aspects also should be included in classification of nation-state films (Higson, 1989 as cite from Croft, 1998: p.387). So

that, the workflow between Malaysia national film/Mainstream film (using digital and then transfer to celluloid to fulfill the format in cinema) and Malaysia indie film (using digital without transfer to celluloid) was totally different. Because their film could not screen at cinema cause the D-cinema just import into Malaysia since year 2013.

Besides that, the role of the state also was important for looking forward. According to Crofts (1998), the government plays as pivotal role in film industries (p. 389). All the films tend to public in cinema should be passing through examine by censorship board of Malaysia before screening. That is why this type of film allocated as indie films and why not nation-state film although their film was produce and shooting in Malaysia.

Overall, researcher will be looking Malaysia indie film through what type of film they produce, how they distribute the film and where they exhibition the film.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

In conclusion, in this research, the ideology and elements previously employed by scholars to judge nation-state cinema were being summarized and will be use to identify the specific characteristic of Malaysia indie film. In addition, the main focus was allocated on discussing the processes involved in making an indie film in Malaysia such as film production, film distribution and film exhibition. Not to mention, in the film production part, researcher will focus on Malaysia indie filmmakers working flow, certainly, the discussion in aspect film themes and styles used by Malaysia indie filmmakers will be considered. Lastly, from aspect of government also to be discussed. Because government also work as stakeholder to funding/produce film. Beside that, Malaysia film censorship board working under government agency, they have right to ban the films that do not suitable to screening in Malaysia. According to Khoo (2006), all the script had been approve by government agency (FINAS) to confirm the subject matter do not touch on sensitive issue such as race, special position of the Malays, and religion (p. 19). So that's, the relationship between Malaysia indie filmmaker and state policies was Influence each other. In overall, it is hoped that the present study can provide useful insights on the development of Malaysia indie film. By doing so, we believe that local audience will more appreciate the local indie films.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

Filmmakers who produce film outside the studio system are positioned as independent filmmaker. In foreign, this concept was emerged since some of the filmmakers do not want to follow the convention filmmaking created by the studio system. That means all the inevitable process of making films (producing, distribution and exhibition) were controlled by five of the tycoon film companies,(i.e., The 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Warner Bros, Walt Disney and Columbia Picture) (Carolyn, 2009). According to Sherry B. ORTNER (2012), American independent filmmakers see themselves as challenging the hegemony of Hollywood. They eschew



entertainment: fantasy, pleasure, happy endings and offering harsh and “edgy” stories about life in contemporary society.

Similar affair also happened in Malaysia, after the fall down of Shaw Brother and Cathay-Keris as previously mentioned in chapter one. No matter the films were produced on digital format or celluloid, all the filmmakers were considered working on independent path (Lim D, 2004 as cite from Khoo, 2007). In fact, the independent films became plenty due to familiarity of the digital world. According to Tilman Baumgartel (2012), the independent film would not be occurred in Southeast Asia if digital video never ever invent (p. 4). That is one of the advantage to young/new filmmakers at which they can grab the opportunities to make films without consider the availability of stakeholders.

In this chapter, researcher will start from figure out the initial concept of independent film, because that is the fundamental to define independent film and road to define Malaysia indie film. The difference perspective about indie film from different scholar or director judge the indie film in different country will be discussed as well. Lastly, researcher will figure out how the workflow of those indie filmmakers who utilize advantage of digital camera.