

Full Report on the IPS-SAM Roundtable on Growing Singapore's Film Industry

(part of the IPS-SAM Spotlight on Cultural Policy Series)



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Cover photo:

Poster of *Wet Season*, directed by Singapore filmmaker Anthony Chen in 2019. The film won numerous awards including the Cannes Festival's *Caméra d'Or* for best first feature. Photo courtesy of Giraffe Pictures.

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Singapore films and filmmakers have been putting the tiny island on the cinematic world stage, with films like *Ilo Ilo*, *Apprentice*, *Pop Aye* and *A Land Imagined* winning awards at critically acclaimed film festivals.

On the policy front, such success can partly be traced to the setting up of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC) in 1998 and the Media Development Authority (now IMDA) in 2003. In addition, the government's Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) in 2012 made recommendations to enhance support for non-commercial films with artistic, heritage and cultural significance.

This is a report of a roundtable discussion on the impact of these policies organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on 9 October 2019. Titled "Growing Singapore's Film Industry: Projecting from the Past and Present into the Future", it was organised in collaboration with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), and with the help of Boo Junfeng and Jasmine Ng of the Singapore Association of Motion Pictures Professionals (SAMPP).

The roundtable saw the participation of 41 policymakers, filmmakers, producers, distributors, cinema operators, academics and other experts. Myriad issues were discussed by the participants, including the challenges faced by arthouse and commercial filmmakers, the strengths and weaknesses of specific film grants, and the role of education in expanding the audiences' tastes for Singapore films.

The five presenters were:

1. Mr Joachim Ng, Director of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC)
2. Mr Boo Junfeng, filmmaker
3. Mr Ng Say Yong, Chief Content Officer of mm2 Asia Ltd
4. Ms Jasmine Ng, filmmaker and President of the Singapore Association of Motion Pictures Professionals (SAMPP)
5. Ms Tan Pin Pin, film director

The presentations were followed by a discussion session that was moderated by Ms Yvonne Tham, Chief Executive Officer of the Esplanade, and open to all participants.

Policymaking as about making choices

Mr Joachim Ng spoke on the importance of supporting Singapore films as they serve as a flag bearer for national identity and for cultural export purposes. He added that policymaking to the SFC was about making choices with limited resources and focusing these resources on certain groups in the local film industry, such as directors and producers. He also identified the three strategic thrusts that are pivotal to the SFC: first, talent development, that is, identifying and nurturing successive generations of storytellers and filmmakers; second, internationalisation by moving beyond Singaporean stories to leveraging talent from the region, particularly Southeast Asia, and participating in their film projects; and third, audience cultivation to raise the level of film literacy among Singaporeans to make the film industry more commercially viable.

Of “my cinema” and “our cinema”

Mr Boo Junfeng said the individual narratives of filmmakers served as a useful reminder to policymakers on “why we filmmakers do what we do”. Through his personal journey as a filmmaker, Mr Boo talked about the magic of films in transporting audiences to emotional places, the filmmakers he admired, the funding challenges that he and his producers had faced, and his “hunger” to produce a film that he himself had yet to see from Singapore. He also touched on the idea of “our cinema”, defined as coming from the ground and by authentic independent voices with a vision to tell Singapore stories through film.

A multiplier effect beyond Singapore

Mr Ng Say Yong spoke on the challenges of making commercial films and having a viable industry in Singapore. These challenges were due to factors such as the city-state’s small domestic market, the increasing access to more Hollywood and other international content by digital streamers such as Netflix for local audiences, and the high costs of hiring production and technical crew, as compared with our Southeast Asian neighbours. Hence, he suggested filmmakers should venture out of Singapore to other markets, such as Hong Kong, to make films for these overseas audiences. When they succeed, they could bring along producers and designers to work on these overseas movie projects.

Long-term relationships and time horizons

Ms Jasmine Ng provided the context for the formation of SAMPP and how its members have rallied to engage policymakers through dialogue to address certain policy gaps. For example, through the recommendations made by SAMPP to the ACSR, greater support has been given to non-commercial films of artistic, heritage and cultural significance. She also pointed out the challenges of continued engagement with policymakers given the short tenure of the top leadership in the government’s info-communication and media agencies.

A wish list for Singapore's film industry

Ms Tan Pin Pin outlined her wish list for the SFC, as it has celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2018. Amongst the items on her wish list were having an official statement about the role of film in Singapore beyond recognising its economic contribution, having the SFC facilitate a forum for recipients to give a talk to the film community on their experiences, and for the SFC to systematically track the progress and careers of all scholarship recipients and award winners. Ms Tan also called on the SFC to support the lifting of restrictions on the use of dialects in Singapore films.

Discussion

The main points raised during the discussion that followed the above presentations were:

1. While Singapore films like *Ilo Ilo*, *Apprentice* and *A Land Imagined* have been feted at critically acclaimed film festivals, their Singapore box office receipts were dismal. There was a need to educate the moviegoers in Singapore to appreciate different kinds of films, beyond Hollywood productions. Suggested policy interventions include the introduction of film quota systems and giving cash incentives to the public to watch Singapore films.
2. With the merger of the Infocomm Development Authority and the Media Development Authority into the existing IMDA, there was a sense among some participants that this was a slant towards info-communications. As a result, media and film have become a small subset in the digital technology and media landscape. It was noted that even before the merger, some film genres, such as documentaries and animation, were already accorded lower priorities by policymakers.
3. With the increasing focus on nurturing producers, it would be useful to revisit the defunct Project Development Grant.
4. Greater importance should be given to the preservation of film, and it is the responsibility of not just the government but that of the entire film community.

Introduction

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), together with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) and Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals (SAMPP), organised a roundtable discussion on 9 October 2019 to look into the issues surrounding the development of Singapore's film industry.

The roundtable discussion was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and examined the following issues:

- What is the current state of the Singapore film industry?
- What are the prospects of the industry?
- What has been the impact of film-related policies and what further needs to be done?

Forty-one participants, including policymakers, filmmakers, producers, distributors, cinema operators and academics, attended the roundtable discussion. The roundtable was chaired by Ms Yvonne Tham, Chief Executive Officer of the Esplanade.

Mr Tan Tarn How, IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, started the roundtable with some introductory remarks. In her opening remarks, Dr June Yap, Director, Curatorial, Programmes and Publications, at SAM, said that film as a medium was not unfamiliar to SAM given the organisation's involvement in the visual arts. Numerous visual artists in Singapore, such as Ho Tzu Nyen, Ming Wong, Ho Rui An and Shubigi Rao, have been interested in using film in their work. The topic of film was fitting as SAM anticipates more film presentations by filmmakers and artists in its future curation.

Five speakers delivered their presentations in the following order:

1. Mr Joachim Ng, Director of the Singapore Film Commission (SFC)
2. Mr Boo Junfeng, filmmaker
3. Mr Ng Say Yong, Chief Content Officer of mm2 Asia Ltd
4. Ms Jasmine Ng, filmmaker and President of the Singapore Association of Motion Pictures Professionals (SAMPP)
5. Ms Tan Pin Pin, film director

The presentations were followed by an hour-long discussion session that was open to all participants and moderated by Ms Tham.

Speaker 1: Joachim Ng

First of all, I would like to thank IPS and SAM for inviting me here. This is the first time I am participating in such a conversational session and I must apologise because I didn't quite know what I will be expecting or whom I will be speaking to. I thought I would be speaking to a bunch of government and policy people, academics and maybe some students.

But I turn up today, and I see such a well-informed group. These are the people that we party with all year round. So, my apologies. Some of my presentation materials will be actually quite basic. I thought that being the first presenter and coming from the Singapore Film Commission (SFC), I will frame the history and include a little bit of the statistics that make up our industry. Then I go into a little bit of policy considerations, about the things the SFC thinks about in developing the film industry. So, I will run by the first part quite quickly.

So, a little bit about myself. My name is Joachim, I am an employee of the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA). The SFC is a portfolio that I hold concurrently, and it is a team within IMDA. I have led the SFC for the last six years. If you looked at my profile, I am by training an industrial engineer. Somehow, that makes me qualified to lead the SFC and that is government for you.

I was going to start with this slide here and it would only work if people in this room were students or academics. It does not work for any of you here because I would have asked, "How many of you have watched this film?" Most of you will say, "Actually I produced it" or "I participated in the production". So, in a way, this film really represents a very landmark or milestone project that we did. It's *Crazy Rich Asians*. It was shot in 2017 in Singapore and released in 2018. It broke all box office records not just in Singapore but in many Southeast Asian countries as well. It went on to earn about S\$260 million worldwide. A very successful film.

More importantly, this is what it meant to us. What the public or the audience does not usually see is the industry behind the film. You need talent to come together to make this film happen. When the production team for *Crazy Rich Asians* came to Singapore, it hired 300 talents, 300 brilliant talents. In fact, for that entire month, all production ground to a halt in the country because Warner Brothers basically hired anyone they could lay their hands on and made this film. And this is in a way an example of what we call "made in Singapore" — we filmed in Singapore, using Singapore as a backdrop for the story, and it is essentially a Singapore story, with a Singapore team.



Singapore actors Koh Chieng Mun (left) and Janice Koh at the premiere of *Crazy Rich Asians* held on 21 August 2018 at the Capitol Theatre. Photo courtesy of Ministry of Communications and Information.

Moving forward, we think that it is going to be important to talk about “made by Singapore” talent, which is something that we have been doing and supporting for 20-over years, but also “made with Singapore”. What does it mean for the Singapore film industry in the future? Where is our position in Southeast Asia?

So, many Singaporeans, many people have watched *Crazy Rich Asians*, but maybe what is not so recognisable are these titles that you see on screen here. And again, if this were a crowd of academics or students, I would have asked, “How many of you have watched any of these films on the screen?” And I would be satisfied if perhaps 10 per cent of the audience put up your hands. These are well-made films, made by Singapore talent. Many have gone on to compete in top festivals or have actually won awards. These are critically recognised films. Yet, many Singaporeans have not heard of these films and have not seen these films.

There lies in a way a challenge and a contradiction. We have good talent. We are putting out films that are recognised and critically acclaimed, but we are not yet near to finding the audience in sufficient numbers.

So, this is a little bit of our history where I would not spend too much time on. Filmmaking in Singapore dates back to the earlier part of the 20th century and the golden age of filmmaking was when we had the Shaw Organisation, Cathay Keris and the P Ramlee films, those black and white films that we have lovingly archived

at the Asian Film Archive (AFA) and presented from time to time. That's our heritage.

But when Singapore became independent in 1965, for almost 20 years, there was hardly any film production. The reason for that was, at that point of our history, it was more about economic survival. So, our priorities were not in putting in support or investing in filmmaking. Of course, back then with the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (the predecessor of Television Corporation Singapore and Mediacorp) starting out, people were switching their attention to television, and with films, less so.

And then we had a real revival in the 1990s. In 1995, Eric Khoo put out *Mee Pok Man* and went on to win numerous awards. This really started a new wave of filmmaking in Singapore. Of course, a comedian actor-entertainer called Jack Neo also started to come out and make films. His film *Money No Enough* was a landmark film that broke records back then, about 20 years ago. So, after a quiet period, in the last 20 years, we have now seen quite a string of success of Singapore-made films, Singapore stories which have resonated on the world's stage.

For example, *Ilo Ilo* won *Caméra d'Or* in 2013 and I think that was the point when the world sat up and said, "Where is this country, Singapore, not really known for filmmaking, not really known for bringing interesting stories to the world stage?" And there was really a halo effect from then on that, you know, something interesting is happening in Singapore — there are people, there are storytellers, there are filmmakers who are creating interesting content. Then *Apprentice* from Boo Junfeng and *A Yellow Bird* from K. Rajagopal were in competition at Cannes in 2016. I was in Cannes that year and people were really interested or really curious to know how a small country in Southeast Asia, with a five million population, had two films in competition at Cannes. So, I think these films really helped being the flag bearers for the media industry and for our storytellers.

To round up, we also had a series of really large-scale productions. Apart from *Crazy Rich Asians*, there were also films like *Hitman: Agent 47* and *Equals*. So, Freddie Yeo, at the end of the table there, and his company Infinite Studios, have been at the heart of partnering two of the best filmmakers in Hollywood to produce these films. And this is really testimony to the talent, skills and execution that we have in Singapore, that we can actually stop traffic in Robinson Road in the middle of the day, so that filming can go on. There is a lot of coordination that is required and the government has, in a way, paved our role to facilitate some of these very large-scale shoots.

Now, not all films succeed. You may not have heard of *Equals*, a Ridley Scott film. But we get lucky once in a while, when a *Crazy Rich Asians* lands — and we had thought that, okay, it was a small film and we were not sure how the box office would be. But that film brought so much attention to Singapore. The Singapore

Tourism Board (STB) is very happy that such a film came out, shone the spotlight on Singapore and, in a way, influenced some of the tourism dollars that are coming in as well. In fact, STB is so encouraged by this type of indirect marketing that it has also started to put aside money to fund more of such projects.

I think this slide is available on our website. It gives you a snapshot of the box office, and it is not a small box office because it used to be about S\$200 million a year. It has come down a little bit to about S\$186 million, still not too shabby for a country of more than 5 million people. We have the highest density in Southeast Asia in terms of movie-going audiences. So, it is a very important market actually for a lot of the international films. But what I would like to highlight here is this. You can see two columns here. There is one that shows the top-grossing box office films and these are the Marvel, Disney, *Jurassic World*, *Aquaman* and they come in, they are the box office hits. On the other column is where the worry is because you can see, "made by Singapore", and our own local films are not doing so well. In fact, some of the films' performance in the cinema is so low, it really raises the question of how we are actually going to sustain our industry. As it can cost anywhere between S\$0.5 million to S\$2 to S\$3 million to make a film, and if the box office is like that, it does not give investors or the industry confidence to keep going and making films.

So, the local box office is about 2 to 4 per cent of the total box office in Singapore. This is very small and it is at only 4 per cent when Jack Neo puts out a production. When there is a year there is no Jack Neo film, it is about 2 per cent. So, the local box office is really small and this is quite a serious problem, compared with countries like South Korea, where it is above 50 per cent. Even the box office of Malaysia, where I think is seeing a revival of film-going and cinema support for the local industry, is hovering about 30 per cent. That is very healthy.

Without a stronger audience watching and paying for locally made films, whether the film industry is sustainable or viable comes into question. But the question is then, why support films at all? Is film important for our country? Film is seen as a flag bearer for national identity and as a cultural export. Certainly, from an economic contribution point of view, its contribution is very small. It does provide employment for a number of talents. But I would say that today, most of the talents, if not all, work between the television, OTT¹ and advertising industries. So, they earn their living from other adjacent industries. Because of the volume of films that we put out, which is around 10 to 12 a year, it is very difficult for talents in this industry to just focus on being a filmmaker and being in the film industry.

But as a country, it is important to support film because, in a way, film is the voice and the reflection of a national identity. It is also the easiest form of cultural export. So, the SFC works very well with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs because very typically and around the world, they would want to showcase Singapore culture

¹ OTT stands for "over-the-top" and refers to streaming platforms like Netflix.

and the easiest is to hold a little film screening or a film festival in these countries. So, film does have a role, and the government does recognise that you have to put in some level of financial support to sustain talent and the products that are coming out.

Last year was the SFC's 20th anniversary and we took the opportunity to not just celebrate and have a big party, which quite a number of you were at if you remember it. But more importantly, we took the opportunity to take a hard look at ourselves and review our strategies and our policies — what have we done well and perhaps what we have not done as well — and we came up with some new insights and new directions.

Over the years, the SFC and IMDA have developed an almost cradle-to-grave support system in place for filmmaking talent, from the scholarships that we give out to supporting film students' final year projects, and from the New Talent Feature Film grant, which is for the debut films of film directors, to production assistance which provides essential support to professionally made films. So, there is a lot of support going in and we do have a healthy budget each year to allocate for supporting the film industry.

When I travel and I speak to other film commissions in the region, it truly is the envy of many of our counterparts. The Philippines is certainly learning from and adopting a lot of these support mechanisms but in places like Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, there is almost no support whatsoever.

When the SFC thinks about policy, and policy is about choice, it is about what do we choose to do with our limited resources and, more importantly, what do we choose not to do? Okay, I have kind of worded it in a bit of a cryptic way: Swimming pools or all Olympic champions? So, what I mean is this. In our digital age, filmmaking is actually more accessible now. Anyone with a cell phone or Apple phone can actually make a film. And we have seen all sorts of films — long form, short form, YouTube, user-generated content — all that broadly could be counted as films or storytelling.

But we have to think about whether the focus is to enable a lot of people to participate in filmmaking. Do you want to build lots of swimming pools so that people can become somewhat habitual in swimming and that's good for health? Or are you trying to focus on producing a Joseph Schooling? These two are very different outcomes, which needs clarity of where you are going. What is sexy does not necessarily pay the bills.

This point I want to make here is that, clearly, there are films which are important to be made, films that reflect our culture, films that tell the Singapore story but may not necessarily be commercially successful. And as I have said earlier, a lot of our talented filmmakers today are not able to be full-time filmmakers because the

industry and the market are not big enough to support their careers. So, what is sexy, or rather, I should say, what is important, does not necessarily pay the bills.

Everyone wants to be a director but who is producing it? Filmmaking is a collaborative effort and it is not a single individual effort. The director is important but it takes a lot of diverse talents to come together to make a film and the policy consideration for the SFC is what talents do we focus on? We do not have the ability to focus on everyone or everything. So, for a long time, I have been lobbied that acting talent is important. We should put some resources into developing better acting talent but it is something that we just do not have the resources to do immediately. So, we focus on directors. Increasingly, producing talent is going to be important. And there are heaps of technical talent. So, cinematographers are important. Sound editing is important. There are so many talents that go into making a successful film.

And it dawns upon me that when faced with this kind of challenge, it is not feasible for us to think about filmmaking as something that we put only Singaporeans together and we make a film. Hence, it's about collaboration, it's about co-production, it's about leveraging the best talents in the region to come together to realise some of the best stories from Singapore or Southeast Asia. That is actually a very big policy shift for us.

When you talk about talent, and especially in filmmaking, it's not equal. There are the talented and there are the mediocre, and you have a way of separating them and that is something the SFC also had to learn the hard way. In the early years, the SFC was about giving opportunities. They would say here's a grant, here's a grant for you, you've got a good story, here's a grant. And it did not produce the results that we wanted. You then had a lot of films that were poorly made, mediocre and in a way not a good use of taxpayers' money.

“But we have to think about whether the focus is to enable a lot of people to participate in filmmaking. Do you want to build lots of swimming pools so that people can become somewhat habitual in swimming and that's good for health? Or are you trying to focus on producing a Joseph Schooling? These two are very different outcomes, which needs a clarity of where you are going.”

One of the hardest things in my job is to tell a filmmaker that his or her script or story is no good. That is a difficult conversation. No filmmaker likes to be told that. But the truth is, talent is not equally distributed and filmmaking at the pinnacle is really about the most interesting ideas, and the most talented directors, team and skills on a project.

And finally, this is a question I would throw out to you. This is a very well-informed crowd. How many filmmakers does Singapore need as a country? Does anyone want to hazard a guess? Turns out the precise number of filmmakers that Singapore needs is the same as the number of colorectal surgeons that Singapore has: 27.

No, that's just a joke. I do not know how many colorectal surgeons the country needs. And the number is not 27 but in seriousness, these are the kinds of things that I think about, and the SFC thinks about, and why? Because it does have a lot of policy considerations. How many scholarships do I give out a year to young aspiring filmmakers? This is because if Singapore needs, say, 20 to 25 filmmakers, I have to build a pipeline. How many are retiring? When is Eric Khoo going to retire? So maybe a filmmaker has a very long shelf life beyond 62. But we have to think about this.

From a point of view of filmmaking as being important to Singapore, and telling Singapore stories is important, and having a voice in the world, we do need a core of filmmakers and we do need successive generations of filmmakers to replace the ones that have stopped making films. So, we ponder. It may not be a precise number, but we ponder. Also knowing that filmmaking is actually the pinnacle of creative talent, then you work backwards and consider: How many scholarships do you need to give, how many film schools do you have, how many students enrol in the film schools and when they graduate, how many would actually practise filmmaking and what level of support do they need throughout their life cycle before they become accomplished? So, those are all the things that we do think about.

This is my last slide and I hope we will have a discussion on what I had said. These are the three things that are important to the government and the SFC. The first one, developing talent because this is absolutely a very talent-centric industry — and nurturing successive generations of storytellers, that actually is a hard role we want to do. We do want to invest in our people. We want to identify the ones that are brave enough to go into filmmaking and the ones that are talented enough to sustain their careers or their filmmaking and nurture this group of people. The focus on directors and writers has always been there, but producers increasingly will be important because we want to do co-production.

That's the next point: Internationalisation. I think it's good to have our own stories but increasingly, it's not about making things in Singapore and making with Singaporeans but really, making with Singapore in terms of leveraging the talent from the region and participating in films, important significant films that are coming out from the region, Southeast Asia in particular.

And the third point is something that we know is important. It sometimes tends to become deprioritised because we get so involved and we deploy our resources in talent development and internationalisation. But audience cultivation is also important. Raising the levels of film literacy in Singapore, especially among the

young, would drive demand and make the industry actually more commercially viable as well. So, with that, I will end my presentation.

Speaker 2: Boo Junfeng

What I am going to do today is, I am dedicating my time at this roundtable to share my personal journey as a filmmaker, in many ways as a recipient of the grants that the SFC and IMDA have been giving me.

I feel that an individual narrative at a roundtable like this for the record is important, to remind our policymakers why we filmmakers do what we do. Most, if not all, filmmakers in Singapore are independent voices, the stories they individually want to tell. While I do not profess to represent every filmmaker's motivations, I trust that my aspirations and my experiences will resonate with many of yours.

So, the big question of "why": Why do I do what I do? You know, it's a question, it's something that I ask myself very often.

Why do we bother spending three years of our life writing a film, dipping into our savings, going to project labs, jumping through hoops, over and over again, trying to get it funded, getting our parents worried, arguing with producers, defending ideas, then spending another two years getting it made, waking up at the worst of hours, going to the most godforsaken locations, dealing with egos on set, trying to hold the vision together with whatever resources we have cobbled together, getting our parents more worried, getting it edited, sleepless nights anguishing over decisions we have made that we are responsible for, and then sending it out to festivals hoping to get a response, sometimes getting beaten by rejections and then finally, when we are at its premiere, at whichever platform is offering us the chance, feeling completely naked in front of a piece of work that we spent years of our lives on, to be judged by a room full of strangers?

Why? Is it for money? Clearly not with the kind of subject matters you like to make with your films. But is it for fame? To have that moment of glory? To make your parents proud?

To answer the question, I had to look back at why I started on this journey 20 years ago. I was 15. The films I was exposed to by that time were mostly American films. I was particularly drawn to the American dramas of the 1970s by Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, and this was in 1997, 1998 and the contemporary Hollywood films at that time were films like *Fargo*, *The English Patient* and *Titanic*.

I was curious about the making of these films. How was it possible to transport audiences to such emotional places? I remember telling my best friend in secondary three that I wanted to make movies. And her response was, "Huh, in Singapore, how to make movies?"

This was also the time when the SFC was formed. The Singapore films that were making headlines by that time were Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and *Twelve Storeys*,

and *Money No Enough*. Honestly, at that time, my arrogant little mind didn't think very highly of these films.

In my mind, they did not represent cinema as I had defined it to be. Now, of course, after understanding the spirit with which these films were made, I have tremendous respect for the people who made them. But back then, at the back of my arrogant little mind, I told myself I wanted to make real cinema.

Fast forward 10 years later, after going to film school, where I delved deeper into my love for cinema, was exposed to great films from around the world, made a number of indie short films, had been to a few film festivals, won some awards here and there, I was 25 and ready to embark on my first feature film. This was in 2007. The biggest success story by that time was Royston Tan, who has made *15*, pissed off the censors, then made *4:30* and his crossover success that was *881*.

But there were also many, many failures. I was witnessing industry folk measuring the success of films purely by their box office numbers, which only a handful of films were raking in. At industry forums, I was hearing comments like "our market is too small", "the scripts are all half-baked", and "we don't have enough good writers". Yet, I was witnessing over and over again, films being made to go into productions, sometimes just after one or two months of writing. That was how long I had taken to write my own short films.

The SFC, at that time, had an investment scheme that was known as the New Feature Film Fund. They would come up with 80 per cent of funding, which was capped at S\$250,000. And this was an investment. My producers at that time had the mentality of making films for as little as possible. Eighty per cent for S\$250,000 meant that we only needed to raise another S\$62,500 to make up a 100 per cent. We would therefore make our film for slightly over S\$300,000, which basically meant the maximum number of shoot days that we could afford was 18.

More established filmmakers would claim that they have shot their films for less number of days. But when I thought of the amount of time I needed to work with actors, the amount of time it takes to properly set up a scene, the cameras, the lights, for what I considered to be cinema, it just didn't add up. I remember asking myself, was it really how I wanted my cinema to be? One with this much compromise and to what end, so that I could join the ranks as a feature film director? Why was I doing this?

I realised it was the hunger to make a film I have not yet seen from Singapore at that time. I wanted to prove the point that there was more to cinema in Singapore than what I was already seeing. Most of all, I had in my mind what I felt was an important story that needed to be told. But my stubborn little mind insisted that the timeline for writing was impossible. So, I told my producers I needed at least a year to write. They accepted it but that also meant that I needed to stretch out my writer-

director fee for over a whole year. I tried to sustain it with other jobs, of course, which consequently dragged out the writing process to nearly two years.

With a lot of love and goodwill from friends and family members who chipped in to help, *Sandcastle* was made in a total of three years. We were over the moon of course when we got selected at Cannes Critics' Week. But when the euphoria died down, the reality of needing to sell the film kicked in. Keeping in mind, before this, I had only made short films. Once you managed to get your shorts into top festivals, that was it. It was considered a success. But now, I've made a feature film, one that was enjoying critical success, how were we going to get people to come and watch it? This might have been the most soul-crushing part of the whole process.

Sandcastle was given one hall in a commercial theatre. Naturally, I protested. Surely, there was enough buzz surrounding the film that a 200-seater could accommodate. But I was told curtly that people were just not going to be interested in a film like that. And that I should be thankful that I was even given one hall because commercial spaces can make so much more money if they used it to show Hollywood films that were released at the same time. It was soul crushing.

But I took heart in the way the audience was responding to the film. Word-of-mouth grew organically; the hall that was 80 per cent filled in the first weekend became a 100 per cent filled in the second week. Because the film looked at a chapter of our history that involved a generation of Chinese-educated Singaporeans, these old aunties and uncles who had never been to a multiplex had started coming. I have also been told anecdotally that at many screenings, people stayed throughout the credits listening to a sombre rendition of "Home", as they slowly took in what they had just experienced.

In the years that followed, many of my peers who have been making short films independently also started making feature films. The biggest success as we all know was *Ilo Ilo* by Anthony Chen. Anthony, probably a lot more stubborn than I was, resisted the idea of making his film with below minimum standards. *Ilo Ilo* was made with double the budget of *Sandcastle* and I had a lot of respect for what Anthony had to go through for sticking by his guns.

This was also the period when, through our engagement with the IMDA and the SFC, the framework for supporting films and filmmakers also started to change. What used to be investment schemes became grant schemes and there was increasing support for the development phase of films.

So, when it came time to develop my second film, my track record for *Sandcastle* as well as Anthony's success of *Ilo Ilo* actually gave me more ammunition to push further. My producers and I decided that we had to make a film with a budget that it needed. If making up the funds in Singapore was not possible for an arthouse film like that, we would look elsewhere. *Apprentice* ended up becoming a five-country co-production with a budget of S\$1.8 million, and it took us five years to

make. It was distributed in many territories, including the United States, France and Mexico.

Sentiments in the local industry were also changing and we received a lot more support by this time. Clover Films and Golden Village distributed *Apprentice* in Singapore and it ran for 10 weeks with a total box office of S\$270,000. While these are not big numbers to shout about, they were already bigger than what the distributor had anticipated. To me, it was another step in proving the point that films like ours are worth supporting.

By this time, there was a general acknowledgement that our films, from a territory as small as Singapore, needed to be assessed beyond the box office. The cultural value from media coverage and accolades Singapore films were getting in some ways made up for the resources that were put into them. And this perception could only exist when the SFC shifted its KPIs and assessment criteria for films.

Now, 10 years since my first feature film was made, I'm now sitting on the board of the Singapore International Film Festival as its Vice Chairman, volunteering my time and giving back to the festival that has discovered me as a filmmaker. The community that rallies around it are my peers, whose work I care very much about. But as we put the festival together, we are constantly faced with the same question of why. Why insist on championing the independent spirit of films? Why challenge audiences instead of simply giving them what they wanted? Why defend the integrity of films rather than give in to censorship? Why not just take the path of least resistance?

“If we want to build a credible cinema, one made of good films with a healthy demand, we have to look beyond short-term gains. As with any cultural policy, it requires long-term vision.”

If the answer to my first “why” — about why I make films — is for “my cinema”, then the answer to the second “why” is “our cinema”. This “our” is not defined top-down. It is defined from the ground-up, from authentic independent voices that had the vision of telling stories through film. Our cinema includes the audience too. It is defined by the depth of audiences’ appreciation for films, for them to find their own cinema. It is because of this need to build this deeper understanding of cinema that we persevere.

Many in our community are also doing their part growing audiences for our cinema. Filmmakers like Pin Pin bring her films to school assemblies and share them with students to grow her audience. Distributors like Anticipate Pictures tirelessly bring in arthouse titles from around the world to deepen the tastes in film here. And

organisations like the Singapore Film Society, the Asian Film Archive, The Projector and the Singapore International Film Festival constantly provide points of entry to different kinds of films.

We can no longer say we have not been making good films because our films have been travelling well and winning awards and prizes, some of the top prizes around the world. The next step needs to be to grow the audience for these films. I hope that the IMDA will always consider the “whys” from the ground in their decision-making processes. The creative energy that comes with this is full of potential but rather than trying to harness this energy to fulfil policy or business goals, it will be much more meaningful if we think of how we can enable these independent voices. If we want to build a credible cinema, one made of good films with a healthy demand, we have to look beyond short-term gains. As with any cultural policy, it requires long-term vision.

Sometimes, I wonder if my 15-year-old self had had the state of cinema today as a starting point, if he would be scoffing at it or if he would see it as an inspiration. I have a feeling he is still going to think he can do better. Thank you.



Boo Junfeng filming for *7 Letters*, made up of seven short stories celebrating Singapore's 50th anniversary in 2015. Photo courtesy of Peanut Pictures.

Speaker 3: Ng Say Yong

I am going to keep this short. First of all, we are all industry practitioners and we know all the issues well. So, I will keep it short, and collectively we can grill IMDA. Joachim has come prepared and if we do not give him some attacks, something to defend, I think it is going to be disappointing. So, I will not disappoint him.

As Junfeng brought up the point about his own personal journey and at the start he said why he made films, I am glad to say we do not have that kind of conflict. We know exactly why we make films. We make films to make money, not just for ourselves, but also for our partners, and for filmmakers themselves.

So, I think there lies a big conflict in our industry because it straddles delicately between commerce and art. And commercial films and art films are quite different. But when we talk about films in our context, we normally talk about arthouse films, and I think there is a very good reason for it. Junfeng has already very elegantly articulated why there is a need for arthouse films and there is no denying that. But I think arthouse films alone would not be able to support a film industry.

For the film industry to be robust, the films that we produce have to be viable. They have to make money. And the people involved in the films have to be able to make a decent living from it. But in the film industry, I think a lot of people do a lot of other things just to get by. Maybe they do not do waitering here, but I know scriptwriters mostly survive by teaching and when they have some free time, they will go and write a script. By that, my definition will not make a film industry. Everybody has to make a decent living, raise a family, raise kids and if the whole industry can do that, then we would have a robust industry.

But making a commercial film in Singapore is challenging. The reasons, we all know. Because of the small domestic market, there is nothing we can change. We just cannot grow the population. The government is already trying very hard to get people to have babies, beyond two. So, I do not think that will change overnight. Almost every year other than this year — because the Prime Minister focused on the environment — but every other year, he would be saying we need more babies. So, the population is not going to grow dramatically overnight.

We have to look beyond that to grow the film industry. Also, the other thing is that the viewers now are not like those in the past. I think the history of local cinema is a bit like the history of Singapore television. And those of us in television, we know that in the 1990s, when you had a local production, no matter what, it would do much better than an acquired show. Tarn How was with me when he was doing television in Singapore back then, right? Anything we did, even if the quality was slightly inferior, but at least the story was local, it would reach out to the audience. It resonated with the audience. The ratings would definitely be much better than an acquired film.

Local cinema was also the same. When we first started out, Jack Neo's films every year would attract people to the cinemas because it was nice for them to hear their own language articulated on the big screen. But even today, I think the box office for Jack Neo is not as good as the box office for Jack Neo back then. Local viewers now have a lot of choices; they have OTT and Netflix, there are a lot of places we can access content.

So, the novelty of local content has decreased. I think there is every reason to support local content, but as art and as culture. And Junfeng is perfectly right, we have to find a way to balance the two — commercial films and arthouse films. But for commercial films, art and culture would not be a good reason.

I was just speaking to Molby Low (founder of Wawa Pictures) earlier on, and it was heart-breaking to see him making his own film. We go through that all the time because the population is so small. On average, the cost of making a Singapore film is S\$1 million and from the box office alone, you will struggle to make back the money. So, there must be other ways.

“It is no point just requiring people to make movies here. I think a multiplier effect is when we can have people making movies everywhere, commercially viable movies, not just in Singapore but outside of Singapore. And they can bring people along in these places.”

And filmmaking cost is not cheap. Actually, S\$1 million is really a small budget compared with a Hollywood film. If you are going to pay S\$12 for a ticket, you would definitely choose the ninth instalment of *The Avengers* over an original Singapore film because it has a budget of anything between S\$100 million and S\$300 million. A local film has a budget of S\$1 million. So, it will not make sense for the audience; it is the same ticket price, so why do they want to go and watch a Singapore film? And that is assuming that the local film itself is well made and entertaining. But if it is not well made, why should you support it? It is their money. It is not like we are giving it to them free. So that is the challenge.

But cost-wise, S\$1 million is not cheap. I just came back from Indonesia where we made a film for anything from S\$500,000 to S\$700,000, and it is really well done. It really looks as good. But we increasingly struggle to make a Singapore film for S\$1 million. This is because your crew is expensive. I think some of the filmmakers here may attest to that, maybe there is no crew here, but it is expensive. We know that they are expensive because their technical skills are always in demand. You cannot make a movie without a DP (Director of Photography), without all the technical requirements. And we know that they also have commercial jobs and regular TV jobs. So, they are inflexible in terms of their costs and their pricing, and

in terms of their working hours. Everything is inflexible. So, it is very hard for us to keep the costs low.

When we go to the region, in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia, they are a lot more flexible because they are a lot hungrier for jobs. So that is another challenge. It is inexpensive, cheap even, to make a feature film in Singapore, when compared with a Hollywood film — but as a cost for the producer, I think it is increasingly expensive for us to make commercial movies here.

So, looking at the regulatory landscape, I am not going to grill Joachim because honestly, he has been very helpful in terms of the regulations over the years, moving from, at one point, an investment model to a grant model. This has been very useful because an investment model just does not make sense, right? How can the government be making money? You should be giving the grant to help the industry. So that is really right.

And I share a lot of your sentiments, like on talent development. But when it comes to talent development and as Joachim has also pointed out, a film is not made by just one person. In the past, the emphasis has always been on the director. The director is the creative heart of the project. But the director may not be the best person to get money and financial support.

So, we have been telling Joachim and he has been hearing that there are two other creative areas that we should focus on: the scriptwriter and the producer, especially the producer because the producer can go out and look for projects and funding. But it has to be the right kind of producer. What we have normally in the local landscape are the line-producers. The line-producers are useful but they cannot create value. You can give them a project and they will break the cost down and make it within the budget. They are very good at that, but that is it.

What we need, from the regulatory point of view, is to be able to support talent that can go forth and multiply in other markets. And we come back to the same point about whether it is made in Singapore or made by Singapore. It is no point just requiring people to make movies here. I think a multiplier effect is when we can have people making movies everywhere, commercially viable movies, not just in Singapore but outside of Singapore. And they can bring people along in these places.

We have just finished making two films in Hong Kong, also with IMDA's support. We brought two directors — Mark Lee and Glen Chan — to Hong Kong as a starting point. The director goes there, it is a Singapore project but made in Hong Kong for the Hong Kong audience. We are hoping that these directors, once they get their experience of going there and if they make it, they would then pull other people along, maybe a sound designer, maybe a DP, and then everyone else, to move out of Singapore to make movies out of Singapore because we do not believe that movies travel.

People always come to us and say, "Yah, our movie is a Singapore movie but it will travel, it will go everywhere, everyone will appreciate it." Occasionally, maybe once in a blue moon, it happens but I doubt it. Only Hollywood movies travel, internationally. Other movies travel in the arthouse circuit but that is not travelling. That is going to markets, and they would have a small opening in different markets. But big commercial travelling for a local movie, it does not just happen. Sporadically, maybe you have a French movie that has done well. Even Korean movies, they mostly do not work for us. We know this because we run a cinema as well. Of course, China movies only work in China. In the past, Hong Kong movies used to travel for the Chinese population but no longer so. And Taiwanese movies, occasionally you have an *You are the Apple of My Eye* or *Our Times*. But other than that, most movies do not travel.



Poster of hit movie *Ah Boys To Men 4*, produced by mm2.

So, it is more important that we, at least for us, mm2, to produce movies for the local market rather than hope to produce a local movie and make money out of it travelling. You can sell the rights, of course. That is another thing. But the good

thing is, film and television have now moved to be one. So, in terms of regulation, this is where maybe IMDA can look into. Increasingly, we are doing a lot of work for television and television is more than OTT and television can include movies. If you talk to Netflix, you know they make Netflix originals and they can be a series, a short series or they can be a movie. And they take a second window, but they can of course buy everything and take it as just an original. So, you can make a movie and need not have a theatrical release and you can make money that way too. And there will be a lot of players. Other than Netflix, there is of course Disney Club. Everyone is out there looking for content.

So, in terms of regulation, I think it would be narrow to just put out the Production Assistance scheme. Of course, now there are separate bodies running it and they have all these funding schemes. But I feel maybe IMDA should look at the whole content landscape — short form, medium form, long form, all that — under one person, Joachim perhaps. We look at it overall and fund accordingly.

So, I feel funding models should encourage producers to go out. I think they are doing a bit of that. IMDA is already funding the Southeast Asian Folklore Fund; that is one step forward. But I feel that maybe the regulation involved can be loosened. There are still a lot of so-called requirements for “local production spend” and there are issues with auditing — a lot of small little accountability weighs people down.

And the other thing for the regulatory body to look at would be in terms of the censorship of ideas. The thing is that censorship is not that strict now, but it is there and I think it is worse. If they go out and say, if you do something wrong, I shoot you, then it is better because people would really come out, like Hong Kong demonstrators, come out and really do things that they believe in, right? But they do not. They sometimes gently slap you. So, people self-censor. You are in no man's land. Now censorship is worse. Either it becomes very tough and people will come out and rebel, or you relax, and that goes back to nurturing creativity. Tarn How and I have been talking about this for a long time. Creativity will not come if there is self-censorship. We just don't know, should we say this? Should we not say that? Then we are in no man's land.

I think the censorship department just has to let go and respect that the Singapore population is a lot more mature, and that they can differentiate the good things from the bad things. Then, the creativity will process itself.

Coming back to nurturing talent, and we have been talking to IMDA about this — filmmaking is an extensive endeavour. And we could understand from IMDA's perspective that when they want to give a Production Assistance grant of anything between, say, S\$20,000 to S\$1 million, they would be very cautious. But they took away the development funds. That is where I think you can take more risks. For example, we can have co-development funds or scriptwriting funds, and you give S\$20,000 to someone new. Show us what you have before we go further. I think those will be more cost-effective than limiting it to a Production Assistance grant to

a few, proven people. IMDA can give out a lot more S\$20,000 for a short film or developmental projects, and you can go out to the market and show people, I think those would be a lot more effective than just giving out Production Assistance grant to a few people.

I think that is all I have to say and I hope we can continue with this discussion. Thank you.

Speaker 4: Jasmine Ng

Sorry for this very predictable title. I was coming to this idea of partners and peers. In fact, I would want to jump ahead a couple of slides and take you to these. These are the people we have “dated” in the last decade (shows the slide of headshots of the last five IMDA Chief Executive Officers). So, this presentation is about long-term relationships and this presentation is about time horizons. And this is about how you cannot date and make a baby together that you then expect to grow up and have a whole fulfilled life all within your two-year term as IMDA CEO.

The point of view I am starting off with is: We heard the policymakers, we heard Junfeng and his interpretation of a filmmaker, and how he is opening up this idea of “my cinema” to “our cinema”. And then we are hearing from Say Yong, on how it is to make a full-time living in this industry we are trying to grow. What does that take? It takes all hands-on deck. It takes everybody to come around the table.

Today, I am presenting on behalf of the Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals (SAMPP), rolls-off-your tongue, right? So, who are we? We are not the first people to engage with MDA/IMDA and the SFC. Obviously, they have constantly been working with a lot of the bigger industry players and the bigger production companies, and as it is to be expected, how the schemes have worked and all that, was predicated on these relationships. As independent filmmakers, we were initially not asked to the table. We did not feel like we were part of that conversation, but we also recognised that we needed to be like a collective, rather than to individually try to do outreach and connect with the government agencies such as MDA/IMDA. So, this is, in a sense, the kind of story about how we started connecting with IMDA and SFC.

So, who is SAMPP? What is SAMPP? Well, I think half the room is SAMPP. They are amongst us, they are around you. They might be you. So how did SAMPP come about? It is just a formalisation of the film community and we wanted to be a platform for discussion and engagement.



A “wefie” of the motion pictures community in Singapore taken in 2018. Photo courtesy of Singapore Association of Motion Picture Professionals (SAMPP).

Whether you are a freelancer, an employee or a company owner, we are in it together as film practitioners and media professionals. Remember what we said about this kind of long-term relationship? I mean, it is a marriage for life, right? We are in it for the long haul; it is a life-long profession. And we want to be able to contribute to the conversation, help others help us, and engage on industry policies and grant schemes, and be recognised by not just IMDA within one ministry, but across different ministries as well.

I am going to tell a story, kind of in reverse, of how we came to be. As a formal association, we got registered only quite recently and we had our launch last year. But along the way, we have had different kinds of activities, even before we were formalised, and we have been partnering people beyond just IMDA and the SFC, but also with NTUC and the Ministry of Manpower, and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

So, we have kind of dated around a lot. That is not our choice. You left us, right? [Referring to the photos of past IMDA CEOs]. Some of them ghosted us in the beginning. SAMPP started with this [shows photo of the first filmcommunitysg meeting at The Substation] back in 2009 actually. Maybe it is a Singaporean thing, that people rally together only when somebody takes money, free money, away from us. The cancelling of the MDA grant for international film festival travel assistance seemed arbitrary, because there was no dialogue, no consultation. We found out that the travel grant for filmmakers was taken away, and that was a very big part of how one gets to network, one gets to meet programmers and producers and distributors, one needs to understand the market out there. It is very much a

part of a filmmaker's education and the grant to help facilitate that was taken away and we did not know the policy rationale for that.

That was around the same time as the 10th anniversary of the SFC. There were a lot of new MDA schemes, and on the surface of it, it looked great because these were all feature film funds, but the language was very indicative – it was all about what the KPIs were. Sure, KPIs are important, but it is how you define them that makes them important.. Another thing were the ROIs (returns on investment), that is, what were the box office returns? And there was nothing said about artistic merit or cultural value. Documentaries were not included. Neither was animation. So, it was a very narrow definition of the hows, whys and whos of Singapore film that is to be supported.

So, when this travel grant was taken away, then “pring” like mushrooms, we all kind of popped up and came together overnight. This was probably the first time that the larger film community came together. We met at The Substation and we said, “Hey, you know, this is going to affect us quite a bit, because many of us who have already moved on to feature films or such, we know how we got our start with presenting our short films at international film festivals, right?” It was tied to not just getting an international audience, but it was also the other professional exposure, about meeting possible investors, other co-producers, programmers, sales agents, distributors and such.

“We are always trying to say, we need to relook at the time horizons, and we cannot be making policy plans that need to be fulfilled within just one two- or three-year term of the CEO at the top.”

So, this cancelling of the travel fund had repercussions, and the way it was taken away, there was no consultation. And maybe there was, but the fact was that a larger community who would be most impacted, was not at that table. So, we came together. I actually found an e-mail, Pin [referring to fellow presenter Ms Tan Pin Pin], of all the names that we came up with [for this film community] and somehow, we ended up with filmcommunitysg.

So, across the years, we have met with MDA and SFC, and it always tended to be reactive, like something happened, like some scheme changed, and then we will write letters. Sometimes, we even referred to ourselves as the “letter writers”. In the 10 years that we have been engaging with MDA/IMDA and SFC, I think we are learning together, on how to make policy together.

For ourselves, it was learning that we did not need to be a CEO of a big company or a big production company to earn a seat at the table. Of course, our voices

should be heard because these policies are made for us, the people making the films, right? And now, we are recognised as stakeholders, as partners.

So from 2009, we have been engaging in film advocacy work in small measures, and it was not until 2011 when Anthony Chen called a bunch of us, and he said, "Hey, I got appointed to this working group of this ACSR thing and I just attended a working group session." Now, I myself, actually, all of us did not know what the ACSR was. And Anthony said, "The theatre people just presented and they got pie charts, and graphs.... And we the film people need to do something." So, we quickly learnt that the Arts and Culture Strategic Review would influence how the national arts masterplan for the whole landscape in Singapore would be drafted, and I think it covers up to 2025. And prior to this, were the Renaissance City Plans and a few other cultural policy plans.

Turns out the reason why none of us filmmakers were familiar with the ACSR, was because we did not realise that film was never considered part of the arts and culture in Singapore prior to the ACSR convening in 2011. This was interesting, because film, that is, moving images, had actually also been under the purview of the National Arts Council (NAC) to some extent. Now NAC gives out the Cultural Medallion and the Young Artist Awards, and I have got to say that the Singapore film scene is punching above its weight in this aspect: the number of filmmakers who have received the Young Artist Award every year, it is kind of over-represented. We are doing pretty damn well and we greatly appreciate that. But those awards and that recognition of artistic merit and cultural value, are given by the NAC, and these have a completely different set of KPIs and metrics and policy goals, from the ones set out by an industry development body, and understandably so. And that is the tango we've got to do, that we need to constantly engage, to keep talking, negotiating and understanding with different partners.

We need to register and keep considering the fact that, when they were set up, the NAC, and then the SFC and MDA, had all previously been under the same ministry — the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA). Then in 2011, we were no longer under the same umbrella ministry with the other arts, when MICA was split: film is now not under the culture ministry, MCCY, but under the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), under the industry development agency of IMDA. How this re-organisation has driven policy for film arts, is something we need to continually discuss and assess.

But it still remains that up to this point in 2011, the ACSR had never had film as part of the review. So, we scrambled together a couple of our presentations — covering what our first principles were and how we assessed the film ecosystem — and because we never had the experience of presenting to the inter-ministerial steering committee before, we were quite ballsy and unfettered. We even put up a slide that proposed how to re-organise all the ministries and the different statutory

boards with regard to the SFC and film funding and support, to the whole room of permanent secretaries and division directors. Well, you can imagine the reaction.

At one point after we had presented our proposals, with our recommendations for the funding of a National Film Centre and a bolstered archives, and to revive the then-defunct Singapore International Film Festival, the people from the Ministry of Finance asked point blank, "Okay, how much do you all want?" We were taken aback and pulled out a figure out of thin air. We should have asked for more.... But, because no film people had ever presented to the ACSR before, it also meant that we were able to put in all our recommendations to resolve all the gaps over the previous years. So, this is what ended up in the final report. All of it. And all of this came about only because Anthony Chen, who happened to be in one of the ASCR working groups, had suggested we the filmmakers should ask to present on behalf of the film community.

At the same time, we started engaging with our "next boyfriend", the then newly-appointed MDA CEO Aubeck Kam, and the SFC. Along the way, we then met Joachim as well. There were dialogues and that was why we started presenting these PowerPoints. We decided that this is kind of our "welcome to our neighbourhood" routine, our ritual that the film community will come together and present to the incoming MDA CEO and let them know, from the ground, this is how we see the landscape of cinema. We did many of these across the last 10 years, because we are always dealing with a new CEO who is there only for one two-year term or one three-year term. We are always trying to advocate that we need to relook at the time horizons, and we cannot be making policy plans that need to be fulfilled within just one two- or three-year term of the CEO at the top.

And I think all of us came towards an understanding that this was the way we needed to pivot. For the recommendations that we gave for the ACSR that made it to the final report, much of it has come to fruition. We asked for support for non-commercial films and that has come through very significantly in the past decade. The same thing with seed funding for smaller budget films, artistic merit and cultural significance, and this idea of instead of a national identity, it is national identities.

One of the recommendations that we made and decided to pursue was the idea of a National Film Centre. A couple of things came together, with the success of *Ilo Ilo*. Sometimes, you just need a good version of a perfect storm, where it leads to good things. So, we went ahead and wrote a white paper, and the then Nominated Member of Parliament for the Arts, Janice Koh, brought it up in Parliament. We started engaging with MDA and the SFC about it, and we presented the white paper to Lawrence Wong, who was Minister of State (MOS) at that time at MCI, and also MOS at MCCY. So, we started having these discussions and it did gain some traction, to the point of even SFC scouting for possible locations to site this potential National Film Centre, until for various reasons, it was parked aside.

But presenting this kind of new visions, with a white paper on film, was not new. As filmmakers who wanted to see a cinema scene in Singapore, Eric Khoo, James Toh and Lucilla Teoh wrote the first white paper for film in Singapore. They were able to put together a white paper in their own spare time on top of everything else they needed to do and presented it to (then Minister for Information and the Arts) George Yeo. This was how the SFC was born. So, kudos to them for taking that first step for us.

The landscape has changed quite a bit. The National Museum's Cinematheque is no longer around, a couple of things have shifted. What we need to do is to constantly review and keep that conversation going. In engaging with the SFC, I think it is about a relationship of understanding what we each want, what your needs are, our "relationship long-term goals", where do we see ourselves in five years, 10 years, 15, 50... and how do we get there. As well as dealing with "what just happened last night".

For example, the idea of a scholarship grant. It was changed from a bursary to a scholarship, and that is great, fully paid by taxpayers. And out of the best intentions, scholars now get to receive a stipend, but that means bonding to a company. On paper, that is fantastic, that there is so much support for scholars, that we are investing in talent. But our concern is the film community, and again, time horizon. We are not looking at somebody just graduating, we are looking beyond that, at the needs of a larger community and we are saying, which company is going to bond a cinematographer, or a sound designer, or a screenwriter, and nurture them when they graduate? And we were able to get MDA to understand that scholars should be awarded based on their talent as filmmakers, and not on "A" Level results or GPA (Grade Point Average), and we were also able to help inform policy changes, so that we support the broader future needs of our film ecosystem with the scholarships, and not just one or two companies.

Through those kinds of conversations, we better understood from the MDA side what their policy goals and needs were. MOF was putting in all this money, what returns were expected? Very crucially, because we invest effort in these dialogues between all stakeholders, we get to discuss what is a good outcome, and good for whom, and what is good for now, also good for later?

And we do it for a larger community. It is the idea that you not only look out for yourself because of your own career, but for a larger community, for Singapore. And critically, it is about looking at what we need to do now, so that in five years' time, in 10 years' time, in 15 years' time, that can come to be.

I am very sure that for the SFC, with 20 years under its belt, this is what the officers working there would like to do as well. Sometimes, it takes to educate the people who are higher up the pay scale and engage with the ministries. No, I am serious about that, because I think it is about having sincere conversations with the ministries, like MOF, not just MCI — to educate them about film culture and the film

industry, as much as we the filmmakers need to get educated about policymaking and governance. Also, it is about acknowledging that when we talk about film literacy and critical literacy, we cannot not talk to the Ministry of Education (MOE). NAC is valiantly pushing this arts education programme, but again if nobody is speaking to MOE on behalf of film, if we are not at the same table, we are not going to go very far. And that has economic and cultural consequences.

I think this session has been quite remarkable, because I am looking around the table and we have got a fair representation of the whole ecosystem — it is not just art film, you see companies who do more commercial films, and you also see distributors, you see cinema operators, and the urgency is really to talk about what the future is going to be. Why does anyone need to watch any Singapore stories on screen, when we can watch anything from anywhere in the world on our handphones. Why support the Singapore film industry?

So, maybe something with which we can rally everybody around this table to look at for economic and cultural impact, is the Censorship Review Committee (CRC). The last time the CRC was convened was in 2010. Because we started filmcommunitysg only in 2009, we came together with the arts group, Arts Engage that was formed around the same time, which consisted of people from Singapore theatre, visual arts and literature, and we submitted some recommendations to the CRC.

We realised that actually a lot of the recommendations that made it to the official report by the CRC in 2010 and the one before, had been strongly endorsed by even the chairman of those two committees, but these were not taken up by the ministry that had appointed the CRC. For example, the CRC recommendation to retire the policy of banning films rated R21 from screening in heartland cinemas: why is it that you can watch an R21 film in a cinema at Plaza Singapura, but when you go into the MRT, and get off in a few stops, to the cinemas at Junction 8, the policy assumes something happens to your brain? You know, you might be 55 years old, and somehow, it is assumed that your 55-year-old brain cannot handle watching an age-restricted film classified for 21 years and older in the heartland cinemas, but it is okay within the ERP (Electronic Road Pricing) zone? I know this policy is meant to protect children, those under 21, so just check their identification at the point of admission. This policy is bad for business; it hurts the distributors and filmmakers, who are trying to recoup their investments, by reducing the number of screens they have access to. It is killing the distributors; it is making them make decisions about ratings. That means cutting the film themselves even before they send it for classification. It is taking choices away from consumers, and that is almost a moot point when most people are going to watch anything they want illegally online anyway, right? They will find means and ways to do that. Even PMET (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) consumers who can afford to pay, will resort to piracy if they are not given access in our cinemas to see films uncut.

We need to have a different kind of policy conversations now and I think it is high time. I think that everyone in this room, we know we are in this together. So, start this conversation early rather than always being caught on the back foot, and say, "Hey, they just announced this, hey tide has turned globally, quickly quickly write letter." So, join us and let us keep the conversation going. Thank you.

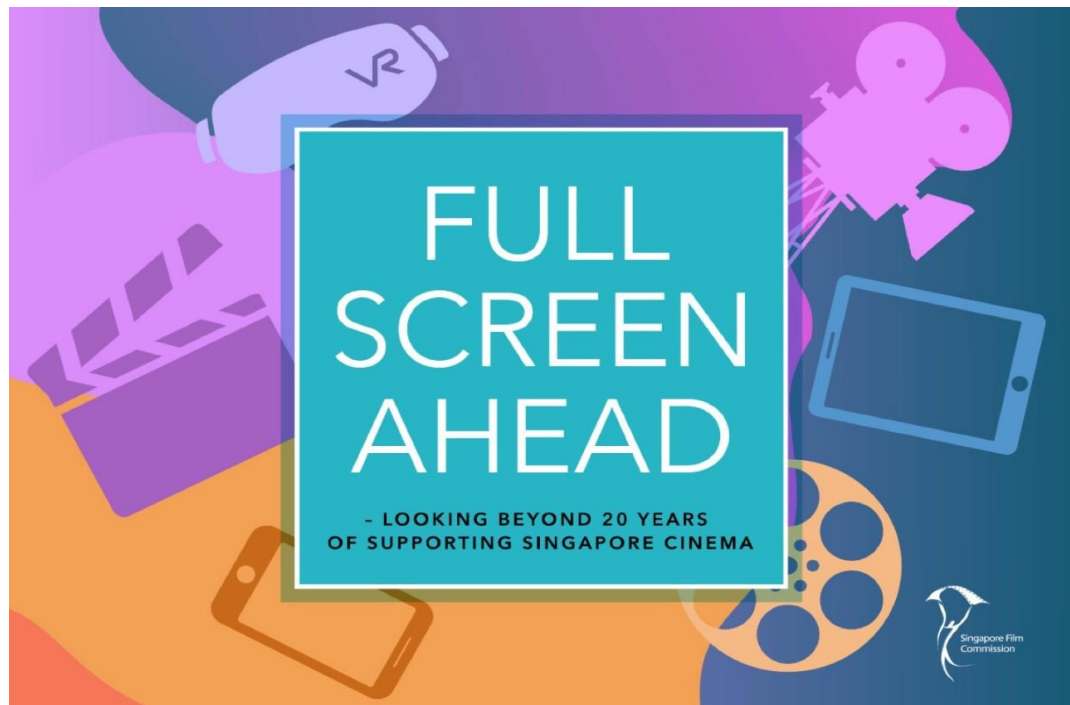
Speaker 5: Tan Pin Pin

Good afternoon, everyone. I am very happy to be here and so happy to see so many of you. Many of you I have known for many years, and one or two that I have not met before. Come by and say hello later.

My presentation is actually titled "My SFC wish list". I actually do not have a baby picture of me to kind of blunt the edges. So, I might actually borrow and have a baby picture in mind when I actually say what I need to say.

The SFC celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2018. When it was set up in 1998, it was charged with developing Singapore's film industry and for nurturing talent. When that happened, I had just made my first film *Moving House* and I was about to go abroad to study for an MFA in filmmaking with the help of an NAC bursary because at that time, SFC has not been formed yet.

You could say SFC and I grew up alongside each other, and we have come a long way from those early days. I would like to wish SFC a happy belated birthday and to share my birthday wish list with everyone.



Cover of the Singapore Film Commission's 20th anniversary review booklet. Image courtesy of the Singapore Film Commission.

As I was preparing for this presentation, I looked for an official statement about the role of film in Singapore. It is kind of like the “why” of film. Luckily, as part of the 20th anniversary, the SFC actually produced a 14-page SFC review detailing the plans for the future. And this is the cover of the review. In it, it talked about its three main thrusts: talent development, internationalisation and audience cultivation. And I think these are points that Joachim had talked about. And it told us how it was going to implement all these plans so that we would arrive at these key thrusts.

The document, however, did not state why we needed to internationalise or develop talent. I mean, it was not exactly, for me anyway, self-explanatory. But the conclusion of the document actually gave a clue. It ends with: “... integrating investment into collaborating partnerships, championing content and capabilities and cultivating consumption of Singapore content will elevate Singapore’s status as a media and technology hub and as a gateway to Southeast Asian markets.”

So, it seemed that film is to be developed mainly for its economic contribution to Singapore. And as we all know, from Say Yong’s as well as the presentation earlier from Joachim, that is very important. But, for such a key document, I think if we were to actually just state that and not state why film is important, we would be selling ourselves very short because as everyone before me has mentioned, film can be a lot more. So, in the absence of a clear role for film in Singapore in its official pronouncement about film policy, I have crafted a few lines and maybe later, I could invite all of you to join me in helping to fill in the blanks in this document.

Number one: film connects us to one another in Singapore. It connects us in terms of a space, like going to the cinema together. And it also connects us, in terms of rallying ourselves, to remind us that we belong in this place at this time, in this part of the world. I mean, who can ever forget that feeling we all felt at the Esplanade theatre when *The Songs We Sang* played to 1,600 people? I do not think there was a dry eye to be felt at that moment and even now, thinking about it, it moves. So yes, film connects us to one another in Singapore.

Number two: it also helps us understand our place in Singapore, in the region and in the world. That is why it is so important to continue supporting the Asian Film Archive, the Singapore Film Society, Singapore International Film Festival, even Anticipate Pictures because it kind of reminds us of our place not just in Singapore, not looking in our own backyard, but in our region and our little world.

Number three: film is an avenue to hear voices we would not otherwise hear because they are drowned out and we need to hear those voices, even critical voices, and especially critical voices.

Number four: film can inspire people to create work, to present the work and also to enjoy excellent work. The moment of “wow, that was such good film”, that feeling that we all look forward to.

“As an audience, we should be able to hear voices spoken from the gut, from the mouths of actors, and dialects germane to who we are and who the characters portrayed are. Do not censor, do not censor those voices”.

And of course, last but not least, it positions Singapore globally. That is where the SFC's support for travelling to festivals is so important because then, people will see Singapore as more than just a casino with a ship on top and a big waterfall next to the airport.

But my presentation is really not to share just about this. My first wish for SFC is that we have a statement like this and these are just some sample lines. And for the record, the last two points were actually plucked out of the NAC's plans, the arts five-year plans.

My next point is, on 7 May 1998, a momentous event happened in Singapore which has affected the course of the whole of Singapore, but especially Singapore's film industry. *Money No Enough* was released. It was about three financially hard-up working-class men who tried to run a car-washing company. Imagine how funny it is. The film became a hit. Part of the success was not just the underdog, everyman theme in that film but for me, the dialogue depicted was a mixture of Hokkien, Mandarin, Singlish and English. It was just so natural.

People saw and heard the Singapore they see every day on the film, on the big screen and many people saw and heard themselves. But it is hard to believe that this was unusual. I mean, it is hard to believe that something so basic was very unusual. Many people saw queues formed around the block and for months; no one could talk about anything else.

So, since 1979, and 19 years prior to that moment, Chinese dialects were banned from cinemas and the mass media. You can hear dialects in a very restricted fashion on radio only if it was pertaining to government news. So, you can have news being read for five minutes a day in dialects but beyond that, everything in one chunk is taken out. Hence, you feel the pent-up cathartic moment suddenly, if you see yourself reflected on the screen. Dialect songs can no longer be played. On the film front, the Board of Film Censors' (BFC) guidelines state that, I quote, “Films with dialect contents are allowed on a case-by-case basis. Chinese films meant for theatrical release should generally be in Mandarin in line with the Speak Mandarin campaign.”

In practice, the BFC allows for films to screen in dialects uncensored for one-time festival screening. So I am always looking forward to the Singapore Chinese Film Festival because that is where I can get my fill of Hong Kong films. Generally, the

unspoken rule is, and all of you here who have been through the process can maybe verify, for a film in any languages, dialects should not constitute more than 30 to 50 per cent of the film. Now, there has been anecdotal evidence of filmmakers negotiating with BFC whether the percentage is screen time, that is, use a stopwatch to time it, or does it mean the number of words on a page. Or if it is in poetry, does that count?

I just want to say for the record, Chinese dialects are very much part of who we are. Today, it is still very much in people's lives. Why do filmmakers have to restrict these voices, have them dubbed over, or even have those lines changed to Mandarin just to fit the big screen? And what is even worse is that we have to petition to BFC to say, "please, please, please, *tolong, tolong, tolong*, it is just one word." I mean, it should not be on a petitionary basis, on a case-by-case basis. As an audience, we should be able to hear voices spoken from the gut, from the mouths of actors, and dialects germane to who we are and who the characters portrayed are. Do not censor, do not censor those voices. So, my wish, my second birthday wish is for SFC to support the lifting of these restrictions on Chinese dialects in Singapore films.

There are two footnotes to this. The first footnote is, *Money No Enough* became the highest grossing Singapore film, collecting S\$5.8 million — this is 1998 figures. And the record was held unbroken for 14 years until it was broken by *Ah Boys to Men*, which grossed S\$6.3 million. So, I would argue that taking into account inflation and the cost of ticket prices, *Money No Enough* could very well actually still remain — somebody do the math here, please — the highest grossing Singapore film today in 2019.

Can you imagine the cathartic feeling of being able to see yourself on screen? And 30 years have passed, and we are in the 30th anniversary of the banning of Chinese dialects. Let's not wait another 30 years. And there is a second footnote to this. In 2014, Tan Ying Ying, not related to me, from the Nanyang Technological University studied the languages spoken in a paper called "English is a 'mother tongue' in Singapore", and found that English was used by Chinese families to speak with their children in 67 per cent of Singapore Chinese homes. So, in my mind, if the Speak Mandarin Campaign is to increase the stake, if it is to stay in the game, we should be dubbing over English shows today and not banning dialects from the screens.

In 2002, when my film *Moving House* won the Best Documentary award at the Student Academy Awards, the win came with a trip to Cannes Film Festival. Kodak, the sponsor, provided us with access to the markets of the festival. And so, with the award in hand, and with a huge swagger in my steps, I entered the film market and what I saw in the huge hall were booths and booths selling films from every corner of the world. And the size of the booth usually signals how large your presence is in the festival. So, there was Weinstein's Miramax, they have got a

huge space and they probably bought one-quarter of the space. And I remember that you had to make an appointment to obtain their film brochure, which was in hard cover. Uni France, Uni Japan, state agencies promoting films from these countries, were there in full force. And if you are a smaller country, you banded with the others. So, there was a Scandinavian corner, with Danish films and Swedish films. At every booth, there was a slate of films produced that year — posters lining the wall and catalogues given out in their countries' filmography.

And I realised at that moment that those of us who made films for the international audience, who won short films, cannot make any impact at all. And I felt really depressed immediately and I thought to leave this path before I even started. So, it hit me then, that Singapore needed a slate of quality films from many other talent. And to get that slate, we all need to pitch in to help one another because it takes a village to nurture a talent and it takes a village to make a film. And these are points that my colleagues have spoken about.

Today, through the efforts of many, we have a catalogue to give out. We have a booth at Cannes. And even better, a clutch of awards to boast of. But my sense, after all these years, is that I am still part of a village, a *kampung* and I still feel that we all need to come together, even now. In fact, even more so. Personally, I feel that this has informed my advocacy work and in the journey that we have had, whether it is writing a letter in support of Martyn See with 10 other filmmakers to speak up against the Film Act or being involved in the many conversations with our different boyfriends or girlfriends.

So, then I have three further wishes for SFC. Over the years, several hundred grants have been given out by SFC, whether it is a grant to make a film, to attend university, a lab or film festival. Normally, after we return from these trips, we just write a report, then we send it and we get back our reimbursement. Then the report is never seen again.

Since SFC has data of who has what, can SFC facilitate a forum where beneficiaries of any SFC grant given can give a 10-minute presentation to share with the film community their experience and key takeaways? I think we just need to share information and it could be something as simple as the best way to find accommodation in Sundance or Rotterdam or a returning scholar shedding light on the university's programme or the best way to run an IMDA film audit. I mean, it could be on anything. This allows us to know each other because I have no idea who a lot of people are, especially the younger ones, and more importantly, to learn from one another. Currently, I feel that we are ships passing each other in the dark. So that is my third wish to have SFC facilitate a forum.

My third wish... I have got some more, sorry. In this line of work, hard work is important but I feel that talent is even more important. And these are key points touched on by Joachim in your presentation as well as Junfeng's. When we find someone who has that special eye or a writer with that special ear, I personally feel

that, oh gosh, I need to look out for them. I need to somehow make sure they do not get lost, to ensure that they are able to develop their talent. And I feel very sad when I hear that they have left the industry or even worse, left the country entirely. I feel we have all got to do our part. I feel that the managing talent part, if we do it well, things will take care of itself. So, the questions that you raised: How do we spot talent? What is talent? How many do we need? These are all very key questions.

Perhaps, SFC has already done this. And if it has not, it needs to do it. And it is to assiduously track the careers of all scholarship recipients and award winners over time in a systematic fashion. And we can even back-date it. Scholars and grant recipients should be encouraged to keep in touch with SFC over the long haul, 10 years or even more because it takes years to cultivate a voice. It takes years to cultivate a talent and we need to know if these talents are being supported.

Since one of SFC's key thrusts is talent development, being systematic about tracking will allow you to know how talents are supported. To ensure that there is balance in the slate, so it is not always just directors, we need to support film programmers, sound designers, cameramen, women, so that the whole ecosystem has to be supported very systematically. So, my fourth wish is for us to be very clear on who and why we are supporting, and that we actually help them very clearly and systematically.

My fifth wish: In August, I and 30 other people were invited to Busan by KOFIC, the Korean Film Council, to brainstorm the possibility of a Korean-ASEAN film organisation that could help develop the film industries in each of these countries. We talked about having an organisation like Illumarch or Euromedia, which ties up a few countries so we can help one another. Many of those there agreed that transparency and accountability is a key point. For example, the sales agents and the producers there all wanted the box office of each of these member countries and organisations to be published. And over coffee, I chatted with a few of my KOFIC friends and they said that they actually published all the sums that they gave out to the Koreans, because it was part of the accountability of the organisation.

So, this is from the KOFIC website. It is a little bit hard to see, it is in Korean. These are the 2019 figures. On the second right-hand column is the name of the film, and on its right is the quantum of the film. This is the short film grant so the quanta are around 15,000 won to 20,000 won. And my KOFIC friends were very shocked that Singapore does not have such numbers today.

So, my wish is for SFC to publish these numbers. When I asked SFC about this before, the official reply was that some companies want to keep their budgets secret and if SFC publishes the amounts given out, it might reveal their budget. I do not think this will happen because IMDA gives out up to 40 per cent (of the budget), so it should not be that easy to calculate the exact budget of these films

because there is a 40 per cent margin of error. In any case, the importance of accountability should supersede these commercial concerns. SFC already publishes the Singapore box office takings so I request for SFC also publish any grant that they have given out, to align themselves to the best practices of the industry. And I talked previously about how we can know who the talents are out there and who has received what grant. By publishing all these, it also creates another community that we can share the information with.

I started this talk by inviting everyone to think about the role of cinema in Singapore today. And so, I want to end this maybe with a thought. Every year, the Centre National du Cinéma (National Centre for Cinema and Moving Image or CNC) specially selects 90 films to be shown to French schoolchildren, from Primary 6 to Secondary 3. It develops teaching kits for the teachers to talk about the films after they have seen them. It is a country-wide programme so it is not just the AFA (Asian Film Archive) or the SGIFF (Singapore International Film Festival) going to schools occasionally. And the 90 films that they select are specially for children in their age.

Do you want to have a sense of what kind of films these kids are exposed to? I would read a couple... *Grand Illusions* by Jean Renoir, *Kes* by Ken Loach, *Mon Oncle* by Jacques Tati, and can you see any familiar names? *Ilo Ilo*, and *Mukhsin* by Yasmin Ahmad. It is the third film in her trilogy. It was when Orked was a really young girl and she goes back to the little village.

So, I mean, the idea that France would encourage its schoolchildren to watch films not from France, is very important. And the idea that they pay for teaching kits for teachers to talk about these films to their students is important. What is the vision that CNC has for the new generation of citizens when they do something like that? And is this something that we Singapore can aspire to? So, imagine in Singapore, you are in Primary 5, you go for National Day, right? But in France, you are in Primary 6 and you live in a small town in the foothills of the Pyrenees and your teacher one day takes you on a school bus. It takes you into town, and then to see this film called *Mukhsin*. And set in a small town in a *kampung* in Selangor and there you meet your counterpart on the big screen.

So, we talked about the “why” of films and you connect with this person from a place and time that you have no information about. You talked about the “why” of film — this is “why”.

Thank you.

Discussion

Issue of representation

A participant noted that there were not a lot of Malay and Indian filmmakers represented at the roundtable and that the notion of representation should not be limited to being represented on screen and being able to tell the story of one's community. He added that talent development should not be too mercantile in the sense that only filmmakers who have travelled to film festivals should be seen to show promise and therefore should be "incubated". To the participant, diversity of voices also means recognising that some people need to be given the opportunities to develop their capabilities before they could reach the position of being a promising filmmaker. In other words, it is important to provide access and opportunities to more people to tell their stories and have their capabilities and talent developed.

Mr Joachim Ng agreed that the representation of diversity, be it in terms of ethnicity or gender, was important, before adding that female filmmakers were important too for their viewpoints. The SFC has also supported filmmakers like Raihan Halim and K. Rajagopal but it would "not lower the bar in that sense" in the name of representation and diversity. Mr Ng's point was echoed by Mr Tan Tarn How who said that diverse representation has always been a significant consideration when organising the IPS-SAM roundtable discussion. For this roundtable discussion, a whole lot of invites were sent out to commercial and arthouse filmmakers and other professionals in the industry, and that the diverse representation of participants was something to be taken seriously.

Audience development

Singapore films like *A Land Imagined*, *Apprentice* and *Ilo Ilo* have done well in overseas festival circuits but they "bombed" in Singapore, noted a participant. He felt that audiences in Singapore were "not at the level to appreciate" such films. To him, audience numbers are needed to bolster the film industry and IMDA and the SFC "have dropped the ball on education". He added that it was not enough to provide funding to make films; investment had to be made in educating the public to "appreciate the films that have been made by local talent" and this was a matter that should involve the Ministry of Education (MOE).

According to the same participant, other than being introduced to local and foreign films as part of the school curriculum, French children under the age of 18 were given 500 euros to attend cultural performances. The participant noted that to encourage Singaporeans to pursue a healthy lifestyle, they were given S\$100 to use sports amenities such as swimming complexes. He suggested that such benefits be extended to the culture realm, which could also help to inject some business into the fledgling arts, culture and film industries. In response, Ms Yvonne Tham said that, from experience, the S\$100 incentive would only work on individuals who were already interested or motivated to engage in sports and

healthy activities. Hence, such monetary incentives might not convert the uninterested into arts-goers.

On involving MOE in audience development, Mr Ng of the SFC pointed to the Arts Education Programme in schools by the NAC and appointed vendors do include film appreciation and the application of films in the discussion of general or social topics. He also touched on the B.Y.O initiative, a series of free public screenings of local films in conjunction with the SFC's 20th anniversary celebrations.

Audiences were not the only group that needed education, said a participant who has worked on film and television projects. She recounted that sometimes, it was frustrating to pitch ideas for projects like historical dramas because broadcasters assumed that audiences would not understand or appreciate such genres. On the contrary, the success of her recent historical drama project has shown that there is an audience out there that appreciates different kinds of shows.

Policy interventions, in the form of quota systems, could help to expose audiences to more Singapore films, suggested another participant. She said Singapore as a free economy meant that local films had to compete with foreign films that catered to bigger markets. Moreover, it has become a habit for many people to watch Hollywood films since they are readily available in cineplexes in shopping centres. She pointed out that Taiwan had an import quota that restricted the screening of foreign films, while South Korea had a screening quota system to be filled by domestic films. Such quotas were implemented at a time when the Taiwanese and South Korean film industries were still at a nascent phase. She added that if Singapore films did not have a visible and accessible presence on the local screens, it would be difficult for audiences to give Singapore cinema a chance.²

IMDA had previously explored the option of screen quotas, said Mr Joachim Ng. But it decided against implementing such a scheme after evaluating the possible "impact on the entire value chain and free market, including local distributors and exhibitors." Moreover, as Singapore is a signatory to the World Trade Organization General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), it is committed to neither exercising preferential treatment for local services nor favouring the services of one foreign country over another.

Responding to the discussion on educating audiences to raise film literacy, a participant, who is a film exhibitor, said that, on the contrary, youngsters were watching all kinds of content and it was not true that they were not exposed to difficult content, which could be readily available on Netflix and any other OTT channels. She added, "... we are not in a position now to tell them what film to watch, or you should be watching this film because it's a good film, it's a film that is made by a Singaporean director. This doesn't work that way anymore." Instead, filmmakers should ask themselves if they knew their audiences because film distributors might have certain vested interests, or they might not necessarily know how to market their films. Citing Ms Tan Pin Pin as an example, the participant recounted that the film director made the effort to meet the audience at almost

² This point was raised after the roundtable discussion.

every screening of her film *In Time to Come*. Such interactions with the audience translated into repeated audiences, with some of them bringing their friends to watch the film. Audience development therefore required a tangible effort on the part of filmmakers and the people behind the film to reach out to their core audience, who could become the ambassadors of their films.

Mr Boo Junfeng agreed with the participant that some commercial distributors and exhibitors tended to use a “cookie-cutter” approach to marketing and advertising films. He said that for *Apprentice*, it was extremely helpful that his distributor, Clover Films, ensured that there were enough cinema halls to screen the film. “As a filmmaker who knows the film and knows the audience the best”, he too was on the same page as the participant on the crucial role played by the filmmaker in promoting his or her films.

Ms Jasmine Ng said that growing the audience base for films should not be confined to increasing the number of “consumers for our products.” Instead, it was about “growing a people that are just more critical in their thinking, who are more creative, who produce creative things.” She added that audience development should not merely be instrumentalised towards how films could contribute to the country’s gross domestic product, even though that was an important consideration.

The sidelining of film?

With the merger of the Infocomm Development Authority and the Media Development Authority into the existing IMDA, a participant wondered about the implications of this union on the film and media industries. While he recognised that the merger of the two statutory boards was necessitated by the convergence of media and technology, he felt that media has become a very small subset of the overall merger. This could be due to a leadership that was slanted towards info-communications, he added. But the unbalanced emphasis on info-communications had serious implications on funding policy for film and the accompanying KPIs. As such, he asked if the film industry could be represented more independently.

On a related note, another participant raised the question of whether film could be considered “culture” or “industry”. He felt that film was both culture and industry but wondered if it should be housed under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) or the Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI). He said that when film was under MDA, he sensed that there was a pivot towards “industry” and the development of commercial cinema. During that time, he noted, the Animation Film Initiative was dropped, and documentaries appeared to be not as prioritised. Pointing that “I” was at the front in “IMDA”, he too asked if there was a shift to “more industry priorities” and that film in general and other less commercial types of film would be sidelined. Hence, he asked if it made sense for film to be considered as “culture” and be part of MCCY. Under this arrangement, film could enjoy greater synergy with the National Heritage Board (NHB) in areas such as archiving, preserving heritage and restoring classics.

Ms Yvonne Tham noted that for film development to stay under IMDA, the film community could tap the advantages that come with working across channels and platforms like television and online. While film development could gain certain

advantages as a cultural product if it was housed under the NAC, it could “lose that connection to the increasing convergence and distribution across the different platforms.”

Talent development

A participant felt there was a lack of producers in the Singapore film industry who could lead projects and suggested that the industry reconsider the defunct Project Development Grant. In the early 2000s, the SFC gave out the grant, worth about S\$40,000, to producers to incentivise them to develop film projects. The funded projects were given a two-year duration to be completed and failing to do so, the producers had to return the grant amount to the SFC. The participant said that these checks and balances were useful and the Project Development Grant was more effective than the Script Development Grant, which was also no longer available. Under the latter scheme, writers were given S\$6,000 to develop a script but, in the end, they still had to find producers to develop the script, from print to screen. With the increasing focus on nurturing producers, the participant called for policymakers and practitioners to revisit the Project Development Grant.

In response, Mr Ng of the SFC said that he and his colleagues handled many different types of grants for the media sector and would continually look at ways to help the industry grow. While acknowledging the usefulness of development grants to the media industry, he added that IMDA had to take into consideration many factors and trade-offs when introducing a grant or intervention into the sector. In addition, IMDA reviews its grant schemes periodically and “will factor this in mind at the next opportunity”.

The participant who had suggested quota systems for domestic and foreign films said that she knew of many writers who had given up on their craft. One contributing factor was that of having to pay the full rate for technical crews. Crew rates have been rising in Singapore “alarmingly” and that could be partly attributed to the fact that technical crew also work on advertising and commercial projects, which pay relatively well, and they are unwilling to lower their rates for film projects. As a result, many writers, directors and producers ended up “cutting their own pay in order to afford the crew.” Seeing the pay disparity, fresh graduates joining the industry found being a technical crew to be a more attractive option. To keep costs low, film production has increasingly moved to Malaysia and Thailand, and this trend worried the participant as “Singapore will no longer appear in the backdrop of our very own films that are trying to tell our very own story.” So, she suggested that regulations could alleviate the problem:

In Australia, union laws mandated that technical crews could not charge market rates for independent films with low budgets.³

Responding to Ms Tan Pin Pin’s suggestions on assiduously tracking the progress of scholarship and grant recipients, and publishing the amount of grants disbursed, Mr Joachim Ng said that the organisation did monitor the progress of its grant recipients, especially its young scholars. He added, “While we do not actively

³ This point was raised after the roundtable discussion.

intervene in their careers, we do help them along and make introductions, where requested, such as through networking.” He added that IMDA was less involved “in the careers of grant recipients from years back as some of them are not contactable.” IMDA too has held several networking events and workshops which have allowed members of the local film community “to connect with one another and learn more, both formally and informally, about their different experiences”.

On the issue of transparency and grant accountability, IMDA “will continue to bear this request in mind, although at present there was still discomfort amongst members of the community about sharing their financial details and commercial arrangements of their projects.”

Different funding KPIs

A participant called for arthouse films to be funded according to its own set of KPIs. Similarly, a separate set of funding KPIs should be applied to commercial films.

Mr Boo Junfeng said that having different sets of KPIs for commercial and arthouse films was an issue the film community had already raised during their Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR) presentation to policymakers: “... if a film is set up to make money, then the KPI should naturally be that, it should make money. But if a film is made for various reasons, then perhaps the expectations for these products and the way they should be funded should be tagged to a very different set of expectations.”

A member of the audience, who is a filmmaker and educator, said that IMDA and the SFC have been supporting the final-year projects of film and media students in Singapore. However, funding has been recently reduced by half. She said that such funding cuts had serious repercussions; students whose short films have been selected for prestigious film festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival might end up foregoing the trip because of budgetary concerns. She hoped that the funding reduction would not be a permanent decision.

Plugging the gaps

Referring to the presentation by Mr Joachim Ng, a participant said that a lot of the Hollywood productions that topped the box office receipts in Singapore had “massive marketing know-how and budgets.” She felt that marketing was one of the areas that Singapore film practitioners were not very good at and not a lot of money was put into it. While big companies like mm2 had the mechanism for marketing its films, independent filmmakers like her had little clue about how marketing works. Fundraising was another important skill that filmmakers should possess, she said.

A participant noted that there were many film reviews in Singapore, found on blogs for example, but it would be better if all these reviews could be found in a centralised, peer-reviewed system, which could also initiate conversations on what would be considered a good film. Another participant joined the discussion by noting that there were “no concerted apparatus” for documenting film within the film cycle and another critical apparatus that examined film via a cultural discourse.

The current situation, he said, was characterised by the overlapping of discourses, with marketing imperatives competing with critical voices and the need for journalistic rigour. Linked to these issues was “the lack of general industry research” pertaining to consumer behaviour and manpower shifts within the film industry.

The film community, be it filmmakers, producers or rights owners, should put film preservation at a higher priority in their production, suggested another participant. She said film preservation should not be thought of only when a film project has been shelved “because by that time, a lot of things would have been lost... and they are lost forever.” When the film community, and not just the government, takes ownership of preserving their works from the start of their projects, future generations of filmmakers and film enthusiasts would benefit from their actions.

Censorship and restrictions on dialects

On the points raised by several presenters on censorship and lifting the restriction on Chinese dialects in films, Dr Joachim Ng said any decision there had to take into consideration societal norms and changes; and over the years, IMDA has moved away from censorship to classification as a policy. IMDA will continue to work with the media and film sector with regard to the rules, regulations and classification for content meant for distribution and public consumption.

About the Speakers

BOO Junfeng has written and directed two feature films — *Sandcastle* (Cannes Critics' Week, 2010) and *Apprentice* (Cannes Un Certain Regard, 2016), and several award-winning short films. *Apprentice* has travelled to more than 80 film festivals, won numerous awards and is distributed in several territories around the world.

A recipient of the National Arts Council's Young Artist Award (2009), his works often humanise broad topics such as identity, memory and sexuality, using personal and intimate narratives. In 2018, he was the Creative Director of Singapore's National Day Parade, the first full-time filmmaker to do so. He is currently a board member of the Singapore International Film Festival.

Jasmine NG is a director and executive producer who tells stories across platforms — from film to television, to theatre and site-specific installations (*Eating Air*, *Moveable Feast*, *Shirkers*, *Afterlife*, *Lonely Planet Six Degrees*, *Future Feed*, *IPS PRISM*, *In the Silence of Your Heart*, and *Both Sides, Now*), and with diverse collaborators (Discovery Channel, National Geographic, HOOQ, Institute of Policy Studies, and Lien Foundation). She has been invited to serve on many film juries and pitch panels in Singapore and in the region (Singapore International Film Festival, National Arts Council, and Infocomm Media Development Authority-Singapore Film Commission). She has been a creative consultant on many films.

Joachim NG is Director of Media & Ecosystem Development, a division within the Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA). He is also concurrently Director of the Singapore Film Commission. His responsibilities include overseeing the implementation of industry development strategies for the media sector, including the administration of grants and programmes that support talent development and content production. IMDA is the lead government agency that regulates and promotes the infocomm and media sector in Singapore.

Prior to joining IMDA, Mr Ng served in various industry development roles at the Media Development Authority, Infocomm Development Authority and the Economic Development Board. He graduated from Virginia Tech with a BSc and MSc in Industrial Engineering.

NG Say Yong is a media industry veteran who has produced and directed some of the most successful television dramas in the past 15 years. At Mediacorp Studios, he headed a number of Channel 5 productions. Subsequently, he

spearheaded many industry development initiatives, working closely with new and established production companies. After leaving Mediacorp, Mr Ng has been heavily involved with the film industry. He is also the executive producer of *23:59* and *We Not Naughty*. In 2012, he directed his first feature film *My Dog Dou Dou*. He is currently the Chief Content Officer at mm2 Entertainment.

TAN Pin Pin's award-winning films question gaps in Singapore's history, memory, and documentation. They include *Singapore GaGa* (2005), *Invisible City* (2007), *To Singapore, with Love* (2013), and *In Time to Come* (2017). She has screened at Berlinale, Busan, Hot Docs, and has had retrospectives at the Montreal International Documentary Festival and an upcoming one at Dok Leipzig. She is a co-founding member of filmcommunitysg, an advocacy group for independent filmmakers, and a board member of the Singapore International Film Festival. She was formerly a board member of the National Archives of Singapore and The Substation. In 2018, she was one of two Singaporeans to be invited to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, USA.

TAN Tarn How is Adjunct Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Policy Studies. His research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy.

Yvonne THAM is the Chief Executive Officer of Esplanade where she is responsible for its overall management and direction, as a performing arts centre for everyone. Prior to Esplanade, she was the Deputy CEO at the National Arts Council where she oversaw the council's strategic planning and capability development departments, as well as the development and implementation of policies and programmes for arts grants, arts education, community engagement and arts infrastructure. Before that, Ms Tham was the Director of the Arts and Heritage Division at the then-Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (now Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth). From 2002 to 2009, she was involved in the development of policies such as the Renaissance City plans, as well as the setting up of the School of the Arts, the DesignSingapore Council and the National Gallery Singapore. She had also worked at the Ministry of Manpower as the Assistant Director for Labour Relations and Welfare, and had taught literature at Raffles Junior College.

June YAP is Director of Curatorial, Programmes and Publications at the Singapore Art Museum, where she oversees content creation and museum programming. Her prior roles include Guggenheim UBS MAP Curator (South and Southeast Asia),

Deputy Director and Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum.

Amongst the exhibitions she has curated are “No Country: Contemporary Art for South and Southeast Asia”, part of the Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative; “The Cloud of Unknowing” at the 54th Venice Biennale with artist Ho Tzu Nyen; “The Future of Exhibition: It Feels Like I’ve Been Here Before” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore); “Paradise is Elsewhere” at Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Germany); and media art exhibitions “Interrupt” and “Twilight Tomorrow” at the Singapore Art Museum. She is the author of *Retrospective: A Historiographical Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia* (2016).