

**UNIVERSITY OF
FORWARD
THINKING
WESTMINSTER** 

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

Unpacking the 'Singapore New Wave'

Fong, S.Y. and Ng, H.

© Fong, S.Y. and Ng, H., 2020.

The definitive, peer reviewed and edited version of this article is published in Asian Cinema, 31 (1), pp. 3-15:

https://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ac_00010_2

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Unpacking the ‘Singapore New Wave’

How Wee NG and Siao Yuong FONG

Abstract:

As the cinema of a small nation, Singapore cinema punches above its weight. The series of international film festival awards won by Singaporean filmmakers alongside the multiple books published on Singapore cinema since the 2010s seem to signal a revival of the industry. This editorial introduction unpacks the term ‘Singapore New Wave’ as a starting point for this special issue to raise questions about the changes that appear to be happening in Singapore’s film industry. By situating the ‘Singapore New Wave’ within global cinema, this essay argues for the importance of considering the issue of survival in the cinema of a small nation, and for an expansion of ways in which film scholars can gain the critical insights traditionally obtained from conventional new wave films. More positively, this more expansive working definition adds to broader new wave literature by exploring unconventional ways in which films can constitute or contribute to a new wave beyond traditional genres, auteurs, styles or themes associated with new wave cinema.

Keywords:

Singapore cinema; Singapore new wave; national cinema; revival; new wave cinema; cinema of small nation

Author Biography:

Siao Yuong FONG is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Prior to this, she taught at Royal Holloway University of London and CIEE Global Institute London. She has written on media censorship elsewhere in the journal *Javnost: The Public* and the edited volume *Media and the Margins* (2015).

How Wee NG is currently Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Westminster, London. He was Lecturer and Programme Director in Chinese Studies at the University of Hull and Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS, University of London. Research interests range from censorship in Sinophone cinema and television and issues of cultural intervention in Singapore theatre. Selected publications include monograph *Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore: Cultural Intervention and Artistic Autonomy* (2011), book chapter “*Rethinking Censorship in China: The Case of ‘Snail House’ (Woju)*” (2015), and the forthcoming journal article, “*Drawing from Grotowski and Beyond: Kuo Pao Kun’s Discourse on Audiences in Singapore in the 1980s*”.

Introduction

In 2013, Anthony Chen’s *Ilo Ilo* won the Caméra d’Or award and became the first Singapore feature film to win an award at the Cannes Film Festival. In the same festival three years later, Boo Junfeng’s *Apprentice* (2016) and K. Rajagopal’s *A Yellow Bird* (2016) screened at the Un Certain Regard section and the International Critics’ Week section respectively, less than a decade after Eric Khoo’s *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *12 Storeys* (1997) captured international attention and won numerous awards at film festivals. At the time of writing, yet another Singapore director, Yeo Siew Hua, won the Golden Leopard at Locarno Film with *A Land Imagined* (2018) alongside Jun Chong clinching the Best Asian Short with *KE* at the 13th Sapporo International Short Film Festival. Closely coinciding with the timing of these awards was a public screening of *7 Letters* at SOAS, University of London in June 2016, an

event which gave rise to the motivation for this special issue. Gary Bettinson – one of the editors of *Asian Cinema* who was in attendance – commented to the organizer that it may be timely for a special issue on Singapore Cinema. Since then, two new academic publications on Singapore cinema have been published, including the edited volume *Singapore Cinema: New Perspectives* (2017) by Liew Kai Khiun and Stephen Teo, as well as a monograph by Edna Lim entitled *Celluloid Singapore: Cinema, Performance and the National* (2018). Both books, which are reviewed in this issue, add significantly to the small but growing scholarly literature on the topic by exploring a wide range of films and issues covering the entire history of Singapore cinema. The renewed industry and academic interest in Singapore cinema at this juncture are evident. While this special issue agrees with these publications that Singapore cinema is ‘worthy of serious assessment and study on the same level as other Asian cinemas’ (Liew & Teo 2017: xxii), we wish to further consider how such a renewed interest in Singapore cinema is framed in this introduction.

Central to this issue is the term ‘new wave’ that often appears in popular discussions of contemporary Singapore cinema. While the ‘Singapore New Wave’ as a term appears to have gained currency in recent years, users sometimes refer to it as directors (Frater 2016; SGIFF 2018) and at other times as films (Chow 2016). Others have gone further to talk about two ‘new waves’ in Singapore cinema (Millet 2015; Keng 2017). In this sense, the term ‘Singapore New Wave’ seems to be a productive starting point for this special issue to raise questions about the changes that appear to be happening in Singapore’s film industry.

Singapore cinema: A brief history

The immediate question raised is, when does the ‘Singapore New Wave’ begin? This seemingly innocent question points to classic debates in film studies. What makes the ‘Singapore New Wave’ specifically Singaporean? Also, what is new about the ‘Singapore New Wave’ and as opposed to what? When the term ‘new wave’ is scrutinized as a spatial and temporal metaphor, questions arise: what is constitutive of the ‘national’ and ‘new’, in relation to what that had preceded, and/or in opposition to what that coexists? Considering the literature written on the different new waves, a ‘new wave’ is broadly supposed to embody the distinctive culture and history of a nation, demonstrate characteristics which distinguish the ‘new wave’ of one nation from another, and also be coherent enough yet distinctively different from the dominant cinematic themes and styles that preceded, however defined and understood. A key issue in the study of new wave cinemas is therefore the supposed relationship between the nation and ‘new wave.’ Before we delve further into discussions of the ‘new wave’, it is crucial to first examine the term ‘national cinema,’ which for Singapore, demonstrates that issues of language, ethnicity and identity may not be as straightforward as compared to the national cinemas of other countries. This is after all, a young, multilingual and multi-ethnic city-state which was formerly colonised by the British. A brief introduction to the history of Singapore and its cinema would enable us to appreciate its distinctive characteristics but also foreground and situate our discussion of ‘Singapore new wave’ at the intersections of discourse on international commercial cinema and arthouse cinema before introducing readers to the essays in this issue. In so doing, we argue that inasmuch as Singapore cinema is unique, the issues raised will illuminate understandings of the experiences and cultures associated with other national cinemas in an increasingly interconnected global context.

The developments in Singapore's film industry is intimately linked to political changes of the nation. Singapore was under British colonial rule from 1819 before being occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War between 1942 and 1945. Having lost faith in the credibility of the British colonials as rulers after the war, Singapore society went through two decades of political awakening, which culminated in a merger with Malaysia in 1963 followed by national independence in 1965. The People's Action Party has been governing Singapore with a parliamentary majority since then.

The general consensus is that Singapore cinema can historically be divided into two broad periods, with a twenty-year gap in between during which no films were made. The first period is often referred to as the 'golden age' of Singapore cinema dominated by Malay language films. The first Malay talkie *Leila Majnun* was filmed in Singapore in 1933 (Uhde and Uhde 2000, 3) during British colonial rule. However, the industry ground to a halt during the Second World War. In the postwar period, Malay filmmaking in Singapore flourished with over 200 Malay films produced between the late 1940s and early 1970s, reaching a climax during the period when Singapore participated in the independence movement in Malaya and merged with Malaysia in 1963. During this period, the large repertoire of Malay films produced enjoyed immense popularity in the Malay Peninsula; many of them could be understood as trailblazing not only for engaging with themes such as modernity, urbanization and female sexuality, but also for breaking away from the traditional Malay musical form of *Bangsawan*. Following Singapore's independence in 1965, many filmmakers, actors and producers instrumental to the flourishing of cinema during this golden age relocated to either Malaysia or Singapore, including the legendary P. Ramlee who moved from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. In the first instance, benchmarking later Singaporean films as a 'new wave' against this 'golden age' of filmmaking runs into difficulties due to Singapore sharing a political, colonial and film history with Malaysia. The question of the national ownership of this 'golden age' of Malay films remains a topic of debate till this day and these films are mainly studied as films made in Singapore rather than as Singapore films (Lim 2017). The inclusion of these films in Singapore's national cinema has also been disputed for its 'exclusion of the visual representation of ethnic Chinese and their failure to address the reality of a society which is predominantly Chinese' (Wei 2011: 72). This position not only disregards Malay as lingua franca across different ethnic groups in Singapore at a time before English gradually overtook its importance since the People's Action Party came to power in 1959, but also overlooks the detail that many of these films appealed to audiences of different ethnicities in both Singapore and Malaysia (Wong et al 2018). On the other hand, if the 'golden era' can be thought of as a postwar wave reacting against Japanese propaganda films targeted at occupied territories in Southeast Asia (cf. White 1997), why would it be impossible to think of Malay-language films as shared legacy between the national cinemas of Malaysia and Singapore?

Furthermore, as we probe the viability and appropriateness of 'Singapore New Wave' in academic research at a time when more Singapore filmmakers are screening their works at international film festivals and winning awards, we witness an increased frequency of the exhibiting of artefacts and screenings of films from the golden era in Singapore museums and galleries (Alfian 2015; Infocomm Media Development Authority 2017). This raises questions about state attempts at reconstructing 'national memory' through film history, as well as the ongoing relationship between the golden era and the construction of 'national identity' and recent Singapore films. Indeed, when contemporary Singapore director Royston Tan claims that his musical film *881* (2007) has been inspired by the 'golden age' of Malay cinema (quoted in Alfian 2015), it invites us to contemplate the latter's relationship with

recent Singapore cinema production. Another potential gap is apparent here, which, if positioned in the fields of memory studies, film studies and social history, following the trailblazing work of Annette Kuhn (2002), would invite further inquiry into how different ethnic audiences regarded Malay golden era films in their lived experiences. Further complicating the definition of Singapore national cinema are the production of two Malayanized Chinese-language films by Yi Sui, namely *Lion City* (1960), which negotiated the tensions between nation-building and the preservation of Chinese culture (Mak 2009) and *Black Gold* (1963), an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist film which mediated the politics of various Chinese dialect groups through synthesizing different Chinese languages, namely Mandarin, Cantonese and Amoy (Hee 2017). Indeed, we acknowledge that there is an urgent need to revisit early Singapore films, including those from the British colonial period, as this will not only “illuminate contemporary films” (Sim 2011: 358), but also potentially contribute to new understandings of ‘new wave.’

After the last film was made in 1972, Malay filmmaking disappeared in Singapore. This was followed by a twenty-year hiatus when no films were produced in the nation-state, which coincided with intensive nation-building efforts by the government focusing on economic and urban development. These remarkable changes to the nation-state were reflected in the films that followed in the 1990s. The production of a number of short films in the early 1990s and feature-length films by the mid-1990s ended the film industry’s hiatus with a series of films that were markedly different from the Malay language films produced during the ‘golden age’ and the Malayanized Chinese-language films in terms of language, settings and aesthetics. *Mee Pok Man* (1995) is generally treated as marking the beginning of this filmic revival in Singapore and together with *12 Storeys* (1997), they represent a more linguistically and ethnically diverse social reality compared to earlier films. Following these films, the use of Singlish, a Singaporean creole English language, quickly assumed predominance as more directors challenged state discourse on nation-building and language policies. Such a development corresponds closely to the increasing demands of Singaporeans negotiating their Singaporean identity in opposition to official discourse (cf. Ortmann 2009).

The Singapore Film Commission (SFC), set up in 1998, began supporting local filmmaking through funding schemes resulting in an average of four to eight films produced per year between the 1990s and 2000s. These included both arthouse and commercial films, which had to meet the funding requirement of reaching a local market. For a city-state whose economic legacy is founded on entrepot trade, state support for these two seemingly conflicting categories is reconciled through positioning film as internationally co-produced merchandise for export and through funding local films that promote the image of Singapore as ‘a global city of the arts’ (Tan and Fernando 2007). Together, art and commercial films constitute the revival in the last two decades. While this draws parallels with the emergence of Taiwan New Cinema in the 1980s which enjoyed the strong support of the government agency, Central Motion Film Corporation, the majority of Taiwanese films produced during that period were experimental in the way they rebelled against the commercial fare produced in Taiwan, Hong Kong action films and Taiwanese “healthy realism” films of their predecessors.

Since the early 2010s, the number of Singapore films have risen to an average of eleven to twelve films made per year with increased support from the SFC alongside more filmmakers seeking international sources of funding. In response, commentators have argued that there have been two waves of film revivals in Singapore, with the first occurring in the 1990s and the second in the 2010s (Millet 2015; Keng 2017). These commentaries largely

organize the two ‘new waves’ around the auteurs that supposedly characterize each phase, featuring filmmakers such as Eric Khoo, Jack Neo and Royston Tan as the face of the first ‘new wave’ with directors like Boo Junfeng and Anthony Chen fronting the second ‘new wave’. These representations often attribute the ‘Singapore New Wave’ to the quantity of films made in Singapore, but at times also refer to their achievements at film festivals, box office takings or distribution earnings, whether international, regional or local. For example, See Kam Tan and Jeremy Fernando (2007) suggest that the ‘revival’ of Singapore cinema may be understood through Jack Neo’s *Money Not Enough* (1998) for its local box office success and Glen Goei’s *Forever Fever* (1998) for its worldwide distribution earnings. If so, when does the ‘Singapore New Wave’ begin? Should it be traced to these two commercially successful films, Eric Khoo’s arthouse *Mee Pok Man* in 1995 or the more recent acclaim Singaporean films have achieved at international film festivals alongside Jack Neo’s sustained commercial success to date? Suppose we were to consider issues of film style and experimentation, then the earlier films of Eric Khoo and early Royston Tan, for example, the latter’s *15* (2003) and *4:30* (2005) are stylistically more ‘new wave’ than the narratives produced recently.

If understood as a new wave, what are these films reacting against? Or what can they be periodized after? As discussed earlier, periodizing the ‘Singapore New Wave’ against the ‘golden era’ of Malay cinema is problematic. Evidently, the trajectory of Singapore cinema since the 1990s does not follow any straightforward path in which evident points of tension between commercial and arthouse can be easily identified for mapping a ‘wave’ easily. Furthermore, whether we talk about a ‘wave’ as constituted through popularity in the ‘commercial market’, as the appearance of a significant quantity of films within a time period, or as successes of films in festivals and awards, which films are included or excluded when people talk about a ‘Singapore New Wave’ and what are their corresponding presuppositions? As can be seen, attempts to define a highly loaded term like ‘new wave’ is always fraught with difficulties. We are confronted by further questions as to how one defines the merit of a cinema, whether by its artistic, thematic, or other aspects, and whose definition matters in which contexts.

These questions we have raised so far point to classic debates in film studies regarding what defines cinematic movements and the difficulties inherent in classifying Singapore films or filmmakers into common themes, time periods or otherwise. This builds on the discourse on tensions related to ideas about the ‘national’ and the ‘new’ in global cinematic movements, which we would like to discuss in relation to the context of Singapore as we begin to carve out a working definition of ‘Singapore New Wave’ in this special issue.

Situating ‘Singapore New Wave’ in global cinema

At this point, it may help to go back to global film history and ask what ‘new wave’ implies. This term is frequently associated with the pioneering French cinematic movements during the 1950s and 1960s which inspired directors around the world in their filmmaking, sometimes culminating in the formation of groups, whether organized, loosely linked, or categorized as being associated by critics and academics. Common to the various new waves is the challenging of preceding or current filmmaking conventions, whether thematically through the engagement of content such as sexuality, adolescence, violence, politics; or technically via experimentation with cinematography, medium, composition, equipment, and editing in ways that would distinguish emerging filmmakers from their peers or predecessors. A survey of the various ‘new waves’ would reveal that while certain film movements such as the Japanese new wave may broadly coincide chronologically with the French new wave, the

aspirations and concerns of filmmakers are specific to and rooted in the sociocultural and political conditions of their own societies. Furthermore, in his retrospective of New German Cinema, Thomas Elsaesser (1988) demonstrated how German directors, international media and critics are variously involved in the 'invention' of a 'new national cinema'. In other words, filmmakers seeking to represent their works as 'authentic' representations of their nation, including those who challenge official definitions of nationhood, are often implicated in the construction of a 'national identity' to an international audience that leads to the discursive construction of a new wave. Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness*, often positioned in the 'second wave' of Taiwan New Cinema, is another example.

Additionally, beyond the majority of scholarly literature on cinema new waves that tend to coalesce around national cinemas, Tweedie has argued for a focus on 'the international and collective nature of the fantasy that has spread across the globe and flaunted its disregard for borders' (Tweedie 2013: 3). Identifying three overlapping phases of cinematic new waves globally, involving new waves from France, Germany and Japan in the 1960s to early 1970s; Taiwan, Hong Kong, Ireland and Spain in the 1980s; and China, Mexico and Korea in 1990s to early 2000s, Tweedie raised questions about the transnational and global forces that endorsed these cinematic movements. Situating the European new waves within the context of art cinema, both Tweedie (2016) and Elsaesser (1988) highlight the intimate relationship between the national and global capitalism (epitomized by Hollywood) for new wave cinema. How should we consider the 'Singapore new wave', situated broadly within the third phase of global new waves, and its position within this? It may also be useful to consider how the term 'new wave' has been mobilized by filmmakers as an alternative to a globalizing film market, and yet how its use as a catchphrase for product differentiation from Hollywood cinema is inescapably intertwined with the logic of capitalism and consumerism (Tweedie 2013). Commonly understood interchangeably with 'art cinema,' new wave cinema often positions itself in opposition to Hollywood products. Unlike its counterparts in France, China, Japan, Germany and Italy however, the 'new wave' in Singapore has not been entirely associated only with arthouse films. This leads to the second issue of what the 'Singapore New Wave(s)' are periodized or reacting against. While 'new wave' cinemas are often thought of as experimental and revolutionary, in the case of Hong Kong New Wave, disagreements often arise as to the degree which directors in question 'subverted traditions' or achieved 'a clean break' from commercial mainstream films (Cheuk 2008: 15-17). What about the relationship between Singapore commercial and arthouse cinema in this case? As recourse, it might be productive to turn to Elsaesser (1988) and Neupert (2002) who have argued that the German New Wave and French New Wave respectively should be defined by production and societal conditions rather than by auteurs. Art cinema, produced on the margins of that industry but not in outright opposition to it, as in Italy and France, often succeeded in being nationally specific and internationally recognized by capitalizing on intellectual and literary traditions (Elsaesser 1988: 276). Unlike these examples, the rise of Singapore cinema since the mid-1990s bears no close relation to the country's literary traditions, nor was it intellectually informed by the pronouncement of a manifesto in the likes of New German Cinema, French New Wave or Taiwan New Cinema. Neither have Singapore directors organized themselves collectively against local commercial cinema or Hollywood. Whereas these aforementioned new wave cinemas reacted to the stylistic and commercial conventions of their national industries, the case of Singapore is interesting because the emergence of art cinema coincided closely with the flourishing of commercial cinema spearheaded by Jack Neo in the 1990s. In no way do we suggest that arthouse and commercial share a symbiotic relationship, but taking into context the small industry of Singapore, stark competition from international commercial cinema, and

production and funding conditions, this special issue would like to consider ‘Singapore New Wave’ as reacting not to local cinema but international commercial cinema.

In the context of a small nation with a small film market and output, this definition necessarily likens the ‘Singapore New Wave’ to a broad cinematic revival. This not only blurs the line between art and commercial cinema, which is akin to the Hong Kong New Wave. It makes the point that scholars who study ‘new waves’ of cinemas of small nations like Singapore’s, where neither local nor foreign markets are sufficient to sustain its film industry, have to seriously consider issues of survival. In other words, this pushes us beyond the stylistic or thematic concerns of traditional new wave cinema to recognize the intimate relationship between art and commercial cinema in Singapore, not least take issues of transnationalism seriously, especially when local filmmaking is increasingly shaped by international funding and exhibition at film festivals.

Such a strategy also raises questions about how we can explore ideas of the nation when it comes to the cinema of a small nation that does not have enough output and consumption of either commercial or arthouse films to construct a homogenous or hegemonic national identity. Unlike previous works that have tackled the issue of the national through revisiting works in film history (Lim 2017, 2018; Teo 2017), the essays in this volume tackle this question from unconventional perspectives - from auteurs, genres and spaces that are not traditionally associated with new wave cinema. Taken together, they make the argument for an expansion of ways in which film scholars can gain the critical insights traditionally obtained from conventional new wave films.

More positively, this more expansive working definition adds to broader new wave literature by exploring unconventional ways in which films can constitute or contribute to a new wave beyond traditional genres, auteurs, styles or themes associated with new wave cinema. Taken together, the films, genres and auteurs considered in this special issue demonstrate the creative ways in which Singaporean filmmakers are resilient in the face of adversity and possibly construct their own unconventional definition of a ‘Singapore New Wave(s)’ in the process. The essays in this special issue recognize these questions and strategies of survival inherent in ‘Singapore New Wave’ as both a film movement and a constructed narrative by engaging with the complexities and difficulties involved in precisely such an endeavor. Covering a diversity of different topics and different methods, the five essays can broadly be divided into two sections. The first three essays deal with the national imaginary implicit in Singapore cinema. The last two articles and filmmaker interviews with director Boo Junfeng and K. Rajagopal interrogate the complexities that go behind the construction of a so-called ‘Singapore New Wave’.

‘Singapore New Wave’ and the imagination of a nation

Does a new wave need to reflect an imagination of a nation? In a time of globalization when cultural barriers are being broken down and film languages borrow from one another, are issues of place making or identity still critical for a cinematic movement? The three essays in this section deal with the issue of the national from different perspectives, via the *auteur*, filmic time and space, and film genre respectively. Carolyn Fitzgerald’s essay *Negotiating the National and Transnational in Glen Goei’s Films: The Confucian Patriarch and the Return of the Prodigal Son* deals with these questions through the lens of a filmmaker who does not comfortably fall within the categories of new wave cinema, local popular

cinema, or international co-production. By traversing the borders of the national and transnational, Fitzgerald argues that Glen Goei sheds light on the difficulties faced by contemporary Singaporean filmmakers. The article draws on a mix of textual readings of Glen Goei's two films, Goei's public articulations and scholarly writing on Goei to show how Goei's two films negotiate issues of national identity and cinematic aesthetics within two broad periods of development in Singapore cinema. In the process, she demonstrates the differences between the production conditions of Singapore cinema's two 'waves'.

Maohui Deng's article *Singapore as non-place: National Cinema Through the Lens of Temporal Heterogeneity* approaches the national in Singapore cinema by borrowing Marc Augé's concept of non-places to think of Singapore as a non-space that is 'never totally completed', and is 'like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten' (Augé 1995: 79). In other words, this view of the nation emphasizes 'the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral' (Augé 1995: 78). Through weaving readings of two selected films into analyses of Singapore's contemporary context, Deng proposes a shift from viewing the nation as a spatial (territorial or geopolitical) category to a temporal one. His choice of analyzing films emerging from the second 'new wave' in the 2010s stem from how these later films deal explicitly with the multiple temporalities of memory and the intersections between the filmmakers' and the film narratives' memories. In this sense, Deng raises questions about 'Singapore New Wave's' linear temporal assumptions by considering how the past in Singapore and its cinema co-exists with the ephemeral present through coming together in heterogeneous spaces. Ultimately, Deng argues that shifting our understanding of the nation and treating it as non-place helps us to access the past and the present as multiple and coalescing. In this sense, he comes to the conclusion that the nation can be found only in its constitutive outside – in the ephemeral, the passing, and the heterogeneous polysemy that is overdetermined and undermines any fixed, unified or unchanging identity.

The third essay in this section, *Where Got Ghost Movie?: The Boundaries of Singapore Horror* tackles the Singapore national imaginary through a genre much neglected by dominant discourse on the so-called 'Singapore New Wave'. Despite its traditional exclusion from cinematic movements, which tends to focus on arthouse films, the horror genre has been of importance to Singapore and Asian cinema. Taking a more macro view of the horror genre in Singapore cinema, Adam Knee maps the broader trends and themes that emerge from contemporary Singapore horror films. Contrary to common dismissals of horror films as lowbrow, he argues that it is through horror films that many implicit tensions and antagonisms of Singapore society are imagined, registered and negotiated. By focusing on the horror genre in a special issue on the 'Singapore New Wave', Knee insistently disrupts tendencies in film industries (both academic and popular) to attribute more importance to certain genres considered more arthouse, and points to their problematic underlying assumptions regarding 'high' and 'low' art. In demonstrating how Singaporean horror films exhibit the critical insights, creative nous and modernist sensibilities commonly associated with new wave cinema, the essay makes the implicit argument that this local iteration of a regionally commercial genre is fruitful ground for insights into Singapore New Wave than usually assumed.

'Singapore New Wave' in the making?

What kinds of contexts are needed for the formation of a cinematic new wave? Does a new wave require relaxed cultural policies? Censorship and government funding have interesting relationships with cinematic 'new waves' and often work together to create different effects in different contexts. In the case of Taiwan New Cinema, the heavy sponsorship of the Taiwanese government combined with loose censorship led to the emergence of a distinct cinematic movement that gained fame in the international festival circuit but fared badly in domestic markets. China's 'urban generation' of filmmakers, on the other hand, were born out of financial independence from the state but faced heavy censorship from the Chinese government and found avenues of distribution mostly underground. The rise of Singapore's contemporary cinema is linked to increases in government funding from the Singapore Film Commission (Yue 2018). However, this also subjects the films to the film censorship system due to stipulations for wide market release. Siao Yuong Fong's article *Imagining Film Censorship in Singapore: The case of Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* examines the relationship between censorship and the so-called 'Singapore New Wave' by interrogating the film censorship system and process itself. Through examining how film censorship was imagined, articulated, and practiced in the case of Ken Kwek's *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues* (2012), Fong problematizes the censorship system as an efficient machine made up of separate components with clearly defined functions. She finds instead that censorship practices are continually shaped by agents' constantly changing relationships, subjectivities and articulations, alongside their situated imaginations of the unknown and necessarily unpredictable 'public'. Overall, the complex agency based on contingent relations and identities make any form of overall structure in film censorship impossible. Fong's article argues that this inherent ambiguity of the censorship process has serious implications for the 'Singapore New Wave'. In a sense, the unpredictable censorship system that Singaporean filmmakers are subjected to serves as the constitutive outside – the social relations that constitute the 'outside' to any identity – of the 'Singapore New Wave'. While Fong focuses on film censorship, her findings are indicative of the Singaporean governmentality of how the 'public' is regularly implicated and conservatively represented for legitimising an illiberal "consultative democracy" that eschews any challenge of the status quo, which is increasingly shaped by small groups of outspoken religious organisations and individuals in a supposedly secular city-state.

Cinematic movements tend to be inevitably linked to presences and awards at international film festivals. Exhibitions in circuits and the winning of awards draw international attention and raise media publicity for the cinema of a nation, as can be seen from the recent successes of Singapore filmmakers. Elsaesser argued that international film festivals 'have between them been responsible for virtually all of the new waves, most of the auteurs and new national cinemas that scholars often assiduously try to define in essentialist, constructivist or relational terms, though rarely pointing out the particular logic of site, place and network embodied in the festival circuit, which so often gave them the necessary currency to begin with (Elsaesser 2005: 26). If this can be understood to contribute to the revival of national cinema, where does Singapore cinema, as the cinema of a small nation, situate itself more broadly and what roles do film festivals and awards play in that? How do filmmakers themselves variously make sense the impact of awards to their filmmaking, identity and cultural sensibilities? How Wee Ng's article, *Taipei Golden Horse Film Awards and Singapore Cinema: Prestige, Privilege and Disarticulation* approaches these questions by exploring the implications of the Taipei Golden Horse Film Awards for Singapore cinema. Such a focus rather than the European festivals traditionally associated with new wave

cinema deal precisely with questions of strategies of inclusion for cinemas of small nations and accompanying complexities. Through analysing a series of interviews with Singaporean filmmakers, Ng unpacks the complexities of these filmmakers' negotiations with ideas of 'Chineseness', 'globalness', class and taste as they attempt to situate themselves and their films within larger film circles. Underlying the article's discussions of proficiency in Mandarin is the core issue of Singapore cinema's uncomfortable negotiation with ethnic Chinese majority privilege. This article raises further questions about Singapore cinema's relationship with the Sinophone and the roles that different film festivals outside of the Taipei Golden Horse Awards play in the 'Singapore New Wave'.

This special issue also includes excerpts from interviews conducted with filmmaker Boo Junfeng and K. Rajagopal, in which one can find more direct insight into how Singapore directors navigate through various complexities related to film festivals. These include issues of funding, how imagined markets impact on filmmaking, ethnic criteria, artistic merit, practicalities and Boo's own struggles with privilege. Echoing Boo, K. Rajagopal, talks about how his filmmaking career, with a focus on representing the voices of Singaporean Indians, was driven by racism he has personally experienced. Notably, the opportunities for screenings at film festivals, including Cannes, Goa and Delhi, are crucial for motivating his artistic endeavors. This not only calls for more attention towards the role which film festivals play in relation to national cinemas, but also invites us to consider the notion of 'critical transnationalism' which highlights the multiculturalism of difference to how film directors may reconfigure the nation's image internationally (Higbee and Lim 2010). Importantly, both interviews touch on the disconnect in ideas about the national imaginary for different audiences and the issue of ethnicity when it comes to the implicit links between 'new waves' to the national. In this sense, they raise important questions for our consideration: What is the national for ethnic minorities? To whom is this 'Singapore New Wave' for? Do ethnic minorities think majority language films represent their national imaginary? What do those in the margins think about the so-called 'Singapore New Wave'?

More broadly, the articles in this special issue all approach the notion of the 'Singapore New Wave' from the margins in one way or another. Both Knee and Fitzgerald approach the notion through genres and filmmakers not traditionally associated with, and hence lie at the margins of, the 'Singapore New Wave'. Deng directly argues that the nation should be rethought as a liminal and ephemeral 'non-place'. Fong interrogates the 'Singapore New Wave' from those who lie in the margins of creativity – the censors. Finally, the two interviews together with Ng's article raise questions about whether one could even talk about the 'Singapore New Wave' if coming from the ethnic margins of Singapore. Taken together, these articles as a collective disrupt the dominant narrative of the 'Singapore New Wave' so far by pointing to the underlying issue of power and raising the fundamental question: who gets to represent which films and which filmmakers as constituting a Singapore New Wave, for which audiences, under which circumstances, and for what purposes?

References

- Alfian Bin Sa'at (2015), 'The Absent Mother: Malay Cinema, Cultural Memory and Mediated Spectatorship', 22 July. Available at: <http://s-pores.com/2015/07/the-absent-mother-malay-cinema-cultural-memory-and-mediated-spectatorship-by-alfian-saat/> (Accessed: 13 October 2018).

- Augé, Marc (1995), *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (trans. John Howe), London: Verso.
- Cheuk, P.T. (2008), *Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000)*. Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Chow, V. (2016), 'Singapore Media Festival Ushers in New Wave of Southeast Asian Cinema', *Variety*, 23 November. Available at: <https://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/singapore-media-festival-ushers-new-wave-southeast-asian-cinema-1201925064/> (Accessed: 10 August 2018).
- Elsaesser, T. (1988), 'A Retrospect on the New German Cinema', *German Life and Letters*, 41:3, pp. 271–292.
- Elsaesser, T. (2005), *European cinema: face to face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (Film culture in transition).
- Frater, P. (2016), 'Cannes Facetime: Filmmaker Boo Junfeng and the Singapore New Wave', *Variety*, 11 May. Available at: <https://variety.com/2016/film/festivals/cannes-facetime-filmmaker-boo-junfeng-and-the-singapore-new-wave-1201770595/> (Accessed: 10 October 2018).
- Hee, W.S. (2017), Malayanized Chinese-language cinema: on Yi Shui's *Lion City*, *Black Gold*, and Film Writings, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18:1, pp. 131-146.
- Infocomm Media Development Authority (2017), 'Celebrating The Golden Age Of Singapore Cinema'. Available at: <https://www.imda.gov.sg/infocomm-and-media-news/buzz-central/2015/9/celebrating-the-golden-age-of-singapore-cinema> (Accessed 13 October 2018).
- Keng, Y. S. (2017), *The Young, Singaporean Filmmakers You Need To Know, Female*. Available at: <https://www.femalemag.com.sg/lifestyle/young-singaporean-filmmakers/> (Accessed: 10 October 2018).
- Kuhn, A. (2002), *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Kwek, K. (2012), *Sex.Violence.FamilyValues*. Singapore: Butter Factory.
- Liew, K. K. and Teo, S. (eds) (2017), *Singapore cinema: new perspectives*. London ; New York: Routledge (Media, culture and social change in Asia, 50).
- Lim, E. (2017), 'Singapore Cinema: Connecting the golden age and the revival', in Liew, K. K. and Teo, S. (eds) *Singapore cinema: new perspectives*. London ; New York: Routledge (Media, culture and social change in Asia, 50), pp. 20–36.
- Lim, E. (2018), *Celluloid Singapore: cinema, performance and the national*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (Traditions in world cinema).
- Mak, G. Y. Y. 麥欣恩 (2009), 再現/見南洋: 香港電影同新加坡(1950-65) *Filming Nanyang: Hong Kong – Singapore Connection (1950-65)*. PhD Thesis. National University of Singapore. Available at: <https://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/17757> (Accessed: 22 April 2019).
- Millet, Raphael (2015), 'The Revival of Singaporean Cinema, 1995-2014', *BiblioAsia* 11:1 (April-June), pp. 25-31.
- Ortmann, Stephan (2009), 'Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 4, pp. 23-46.
- SGIFF (2018), 'New Waves', *Singapore International Film Festival*. Available at: <http://sgiff.com/newwaves/> (Accessed: 10 October 2018).
- Sim, G. (2011), 'Historicizing Singapore cinema: questions of colonial influence and spatiality', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12: 3, pp. 358-370.

- Tan, S. K. and Fernando, J. (2007), 'Singapore', in Hjort, M. (ed.) *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 127-143.
- Teo, S. (2017), 'Malay cinema's legacy of cultural materialism: P. Ramlee as historical mentor', in Liew, K. K. and Teo, S. (eds) *Singapore cinema: new perspectives*. London; New York: Routledge (Media, culture and social change in Asia, 50), pp. 20-36.
- Tweedie, J. (2013), *The age of new waves: art cinema and the staging of globalization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wei, Y. 魏豔 (2011), 從《獅子城》看六十年代新加坡國家電影的出現 'The Lion City and the Rise of Singapore National Cinema in the 1960s', *Dianyng xinshang xuekan* 8:2, pp. 70-81.
- White, T. R. (1997), 'When Singapore was Southeast Asia's Hollywood', *The Arts* 5, pp. 21-4.
- Wong, A., Pillai, S. and Liu, O. P. (2018), 'The Golden Era of the Malaysian Film Industry: Cross-cultural Dialogue and Negotiations of Ethnicity in a Budding Nation', *Kajian Malaysia* 36:1, pp. 1-24.
- Yue, A. (2018), 'Film and Television in Singapore', in Chong, T. (ed.) *The State and the Arts in Singapore: Policies and Institutions*. Singapore: World Scientific, pp. 407-428.