

SELLING THE PAST IN FILMS: SHAW BROTHERS AND THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION OF MALAYA

YOW CHONG LEE & CANDIDA JAU EMANG

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

Abstract

This article aims to examine the representation of Japanese occupation of Malaya in films produced by Shaw Brothers during the Golden Era of Malay cinema, namely “Sergeant Hassan” (1958) and “Matahari” (1958). Currently, films depicting the past are relatively less prevalent in Malaysia, and scholarly analysis is comparatively less conducted on such films. Hence, the authors try to analyse how the films, in a given context, which reconstruct and reflect the historical past are experienced by the society at large. Bearing in mind that the films are based on a similar subject (Japanese occupation as its backdrop), it is important to determine why different receptions were registered from the audiences on both films. This prompted the authors to examine the reasons why these two films received a different level of popularity from their contemporary audiences (in the late 1950s). In this article, both the textual and contextual analysis will be employed: the former method is used to interpret the meanings constructed through the film’s text and promotional materials for both films. The latter would explore the historical circumstances that shaped both the production and reception of the films. This is mainly through promotional materials as well as secondary sources through interviews conducted by third party researchers who had interviewed Shaw Brothers and those who had experience working with them. The findings of this article indicate that the Shaw Brothers were ambitious with their films projects about the Japanese Occupation by widening the promotion of “Sergeant Hassan” to a wider audience and not limited it solely to the Malays¹. By capitalising on the historical pasts that the contemporary audiences (in the late 1950s) had personally experienced, Shaw Brothers had embarked on the complex relationship of socio-political and economic conditions which had also shaped different receptions towards these films.

Keywords: Shaw Brothers, historical past, Japanese occupation, “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari”

MENJUAL SEJARAH DALAM FILEM: SHAW BROTHERS DAN FILEM MENGENAI PENDUDUKAN JEPUN

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji representasi pendudukan Jepun di Tanah Melayu dalam filem-filem seperti “Sergeant Hassan” (1958) dan “Matahari” (1958) yang dihasilkan oleh Shaw Brothers semasa zaman kegemilangan sinema Melayu. Filem yang mengisahkan insiden sejarah, secara relatifnya adalah kurang di Malaysia (Amir, 2010), begitu juga dengan kurangnya kajian yang dilakukan ke atas filem-filem tersebut. Oleh itu, melalui artikel ini, pengkaji akan mengenalpasti bagaimana filem-filem tersebut, dalam konteks penghasilan dan penayangan yang diberi, membentuk dan mencerminkan sejarah lepas yang pernah dialami oleh masyarakat. Malah penerimaan

(pengetahuan) penonton (sekitar akhir 1950-an) terhadap film-film tersebut adalah amat berbeza. Dalam artikel ini, analisa tekstual dan kontekstual akan digunakan. Analisa tekstual digunakan untuk menginterpretasi makna yang dibentuk dalam teks film dan bahan-bahan promosi terhadap film tersebut manakala analisa kontekstual digunakan untuk menerokai keadaan sejarah yang membentuk faktor penerbitan dan penerimaan penonton. Kajian ini mendapati, walaupun kedua-dua film dihasilkan dengan subjek yang sama (pendudukan Jepun), kedua-duanya tidak mempunyai penerimaan (receptions) penonton yang sama. Hal ini kerana, Shaw Brothers telah menggunakan teknik pemasaran film yang berbeza dengan cuba membuka pasaran film “Sergeant Hassan” kepada penonton berbilang kaum dan bukannya penonton Melayu sahaja. Dengan bermodalkan pengalaman lepas (popular memory) yang pernah dialami oleh penonton, Shaw Brothers menggunakan perhubungan sosio-politik dan ekonomi yang kompleks pada masa itu untuk memasarkan film-film tersebut lalu mendatangkan penerimaan penonton yang berbeza terhadap film mereka.

Kata Kunci: Shaw Brothers, sejarah, pendudukan Jepun, “Sergeant Hassan” dan “Matahari”

INTRODUCTION

Japanese occupation, like any other historical events available to be explored for filmmaking, had provided a source of storytelling in the Malay(si)an film history. “Seruan Merdeka” (Call for Freedom) (1946), helmed by BS Rajhans and produced by Malayan Arts Production, for instance, was the first film produced after the temporary halt on local production during the Japanese rule. Aptly titled to suit the subject matter, the film “Seruan Merdeka” tried to capture the Japanese occupation experience. However, it was not shown to a wider audience partly because it was made independently without the involvement of other film studios including the Malay Film Productions owned by the Shaw Brothers (Heide, 2002). It was not until thirteen years after the Japanese surrendered and left Malaya that Shaw Brothers started to produce films with the background of the Japanese occupation.

Shaw Brothers had produced two Malay language films based on the Japanese occupation of Malaya, namely “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari”. Both were made in 1958 and directed by directors brought in from the Philippines. However, these two films did not receive an equal amount of attention despite the fact that the former was widely known for featuring P. Ramlee, the blockbuster artist who acted and wrote the script while the latter featured a prima donna, Maria Menado whose fame was undeniable, if not tantamount to P. Ramlee. This article, however, attempts to assert that the hugely popular “Sergeant Hassan” but not “Matahari”, has a very limited connection with the popularity of the artists who acted in the respective films. And

in fact, it has more than fame that made “Sergeant Hassan” a household name for films about the Japanese occupation of Malaya in comparison to “Matahari”.

Produced in conjunction with the first anniversary of Malaysians’ celebration of independence, “Sergeant Hassan” was shown to the public in the month of August while “Matahari” premiered a few months later. While on the surface these films were capitalising on the historical past of the audiences, yet each received a different reception during the time of screening and that reaction continues until today, a half century after their production. “Sergeant Hassan”, was widely known in comparison to “Matahari”, as the former film is annually aired on TV during the celebration month of independence. Thus, this paper attempts to identify the reasons behind its popularity by looking into Shaw Brothers’ wartime experience, their business strategy prior and after the Japanese occupation as well as the promotional ploys employed by Shaw Brothers.

Before the answers to why one film was better received than the other, it is important to review the literature on the Japanese Occupation of Malaya. The literature maps the historical context of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and it is interesting to note that most of the research on Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore revolved around the 1990s and early 2000s. It suggests that extensive research on Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia let alone its impacts on cultural productions in these countries are relatively less after the 2010s.

In addition, this article also refers to several interviews collected by the National Archive of Singapore. Although these interviews are not primary sources, they are nevertheless very relevant because these interviewees were those who survived the Japanese Occupation and had worked with or knew the Shaw Brothers who produced "Matahari" and "Sergeant Hassan". By having their interviews included in this article, they help to provide a better context about how these films came about. They served a paramount role since it is nearly impossible to talk to those who had working experience with Shaw Brothers, even though some may still be alive. By utilising the archived interviews, this article will be able to provide a more accurate context pertaining to the making of those two films.

In short, three methodologies were employed for the analysis: 1) contextual analysis found in the literature reviews, 2) textual analysis of both stated films and promotional materials used to promote them and 3) analysing secondary interviews resources. By doing so, this article

will be able to provide a grounded understanding of 1) what are these films about (textual analysis of the films), 2) in what way/how the producers (Shaw Brothers) wanted their audience to receive their films (textual analysis of their promotional materials) and lastly 3) what was the historical context behind the productions of these two films (secondary interviews of those who had worked with or knew Shaw Brothers when these two films were made).

JAPANESE OCCUPATION AND SHAW BROTHERS' EXPERIENCE

The Japanese Army invaded Malaya in the late 1941 and went on to invade Singapore in February 1942. The occupation lasted nearly four years during which the Malaysians and the Singaporeans underwent an intensely traumatic wartime experience. This experience had later fuelled the indelible ethnic animosity manifested through an ethnic clashing which took place between August and September 1945, soon after the Japanese surrender.

Not everyone who resided in Malaya during the Japanese occupation had supported the Japanese ideology. They did not share the same attitudes about the Japanese, and this was also partly caused by the way the Japanese treated the locals. It was widely reported that the Japanese treated the people of Malaya differently, based on their ethnicity and nationality². The Japanese were extremely wary of the Chinese, whom they intimidated through execution by beheading, especially those who refused to cooperate as well as those who were alleged to have been involved in the anti-Japanese movements such as the Chinese Resistance, who were supporting the China Relief Fund as well as the British-leaning activities (Kratoska, 1998).

However, there were also cases where the Chinese were not ill-treated. This was mainly due to their economic and business potency and their willingness to cooperate. In Singapore, it was reported that Shaw RunMe and Shaw RunRun, despite their capture by the Japanese, were treated differently. Prior to the Japanese invasion of Singapore, there were attempts by the Shaw families to leave Singapore. However, their application to leave was not approved by the British administration in Singapore (Shaw Cinema in Asia, Japanese Occupation, 2007). By the time the Japanese had reached Singapore, they were stranded because no boats were available. In less than two weeks after the Japanese invasion of Singapore, the Shaw Brothers were captured for questioning and subsequently employed to work with the Japanese to operate their cinemas and amusement parks. During this time, their properties were under the Japanese ownership, and they

were placed under the monitoring programme while they were paid for sustaining the entertainment business (ibid.).

Before the Japanese invasion of Singapore, the theatres and amusement parks owned by the Shaw Brothers such as New World and Great World were still actively operating. However, their business operation had to be halted temporarily prior to the establishment of the Japanese administration in Singapore. This prompted some of the opera troupe performers who were previously hired by the Shaw Brothers to alter their performance to those motivated by the anti-Japanese sentiment and at the same time they were installing and enlivening the Chinese nationalist's spirits even before the Japanese invaded Malaya. However, it is crucial to highlight that the selection of programmes was not interfered nor chosen by the Shaw Brothers as their focus was merely the revenues generated from their business (Yein, 1985).

On another note, the Shaw Brothers had often given the picture that they did not mix their business with any political agenda and thus had a clear delineation between business and politics³ (Shaw, 1981). This, however, is questionable. In fact, the Shaw Brothers had made profits out of the socio-political conditions of the Japanese occupation particularly after they had left Singapore. Their former editor, Chua Boon Hean revealed that the Shaw Brothers had published daily newspapers⁴ – using their printing machines for publishing film magazines such as “Gelanggang Filem” – in the triumphant tone of celebrating the Japanese's surrender (Chuah, 1990).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Based on the Shaw Brothers' wartime experience explicated above, it is clear that the Japanese did not treat all the Chinese immigrants the same way, as often the Chinese were treated in a cruel and unfavourable manner. In fact, there were cases that people of other ethnicities were also hostilely treated. This is proven in literature on force labours, either in the construction of the Burma-Siam Railway (notoriously known as Death Railway) as well as army-related construction or agricultural projects ran by the Japanese during the occupation (Abu T. A., 2000). However, these were peripheral historical accounts and often left out from popular literature on Japanese's war atrocity and it was widely accepted that the Japanese were aware of

the ethnic differences in Malaya and therefore implemented ethnic policies for their benefit. (Kratoska, 1998; Modder, 2004).

The unequal treatment towards the Chinese due to their ethnicity was partly because they were in war with the Chinese in China and mainly due to the resistance from the Chinese dominated communist-led Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). However, this is not to suggest that the Malays or the non-communist were not involved in the resistance. In fact, there were several groups which had been set up with the same intention of opposing the Japanese imperialism. For instance, soon prior to the Japanese invasion of Malaya through Kelantan, two battalions of the Malay Army which was then named the Malay Regiment were already in place to defence Malaya. On the other hand, at a later stage of the Japanese occupation, another anti-Japanese secret guerrilla levies, named Force 136 was set up with a majority of non-communist Chinese and Malays to offer their services to the Allied in countering the slowly weakening Japanese force.

Raised and directed by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), MPAJA was in fact sponsored and trained by the British army on sabotage and guerrilla warfare. What started with a small number of not more than 200 guerrillas who were sent to several Malay states such as Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor, the number latter significantly increased to a total of not less than 13,000 scattered in the jungles of the Malayan states (Wong, 2002). The number of MPAJA members had significantly brought threat to British, who were about to return to Malaya, This because the MCP had yet to abandon their mission to form a Malaya Republic without any colonial interference (Cheah, 2003).

It is important to point out that during the occupation, the Japanese had also enlisted their voluntary armies and cops known as *giyugun* and *giyutai* respectively which were mainly made of Malay youths from varied background. Some of them were of the radical left who joined the force in order to receive the Japanese military training and later joined the radical post-war organisation, *Angkatan Pemuda Insaf* (API) and some of them even joined the 10th Regiment of the Malayan Communist Party's guerrilla army in 1948. However, some of the not less than 7, 000 members recruited as *giyugun* and *giyutai* were absorbed into the British imperial army by putting aside their prior involvement in opposing the Allied during the occupation (Abu T. A., 2005).

Aside from maintaining peace and order of the Malay states during the Japanese occupation, the voluntary armies and cops were trained to counter the possible return of the Allied forces particularly at the coastal defence positions and anti-aircraft operations in anticipation of the Allied landings (Lebra, 2010). However, their services were later deployed against MPAJA at the later stage of the Japanese occupation. It was succinctly observed by Abu T. A. (2005) that:

“Towards the end of the occupation, this Japanese-sponsored military organisation (*giyugun*), in which youthful and idealistic Malays predominated, was used mainly against the MPAJA. This contributed in no small measure to the poor ethnic relations during the immediate post-war period” (p. 223).

The ethnic clashes that occurred soon after the Japanese surrendered were commonly attributed to the MPAJA which sought for vengeance on the Malays whom they perceived to be the collaborators of the Japanese (Wong, 2002). The ethnic discord was ostensibly resolved when the British returned and this time with the idea of Malayan Union. Subsequently, this had brought a significant impact on the ethnic relationship in the later days of Malay(si)a.

At first, the MPAJA was given due recognition for their resistance toward the Japanese. However, this did not last long enough for the British reversed their decision by naming the MPAJA as their adverse enemy, for the reason that the MCP-MPAJA were in their pursuits of decolonisation and to form an independent nation-state without the British’s interference. The fight between the MCP and the British, and later the Malayan government had lasted for more than two decades, in which the Emergency was declared and was only to be lifted in the 1960s. Nonetheless, the Communist insurgencies did occur from time to time until the late 1980s, only this time the remaining members of MCP were either too old or unable to pose a significant threat to the powers that be.

Since 1948, the MCP members were in exile and sometimes engaged in the communist insurgency. This has certainly put them in an antagonistic relationship with the powers that be and in a way placed them in the peripheral historical narrative of this nation. A decade later, the Malaysians have declared their independence yet observed a close diplomatic relationship with the previous colonial master (the British), as well as the newly formed Japanese government. It is in this post-colonial context that the films about fighting the Japanese were made.

“Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari”: Textual Analysis of Their Narrative and Their Promotional Materials

“Sergeant Hasssan” and “Matahari” shared equal amounts of intolerance towards the Japanese Armies, of which they were portrayed as the “subtle” antagonists of the films. This was established by having an additional villain whose existence is intolerable and uncompromised to the level that he has to be eliminated from the film. This role is assigned to the Japanese collaborators both played by Salleh Kamil as the character of Buang (“Sergeant Hassan”) and Hitam (“Matahari”). It was these traitors who the protagonists had to fight upon, in the course of the story in these films. In other words, the narratives in both of the films had placed more weights on developing these villains’ characters, if not equal amount as those allocated to the Japanese Armies.

Inevitably, the protagonists of these films were of either the Malay Regiment or a commoner who, as rightly pointed out by Amir (2010) that, had nothing to do with the MPAJA. Both the characters, Hassan and Matahari, without any political clinging, were given the roles to fight the Japanese simply because they loved their people and cannot stand to witness the atrocities inflicted by the Japanese prompted by the Japanese collaborators. Their bravery in encountering the Japanese armies was due to their sense of responsibility towards the people they love.

However, what exacerbated the wartime experience of the people during the Japanese occupation, as depicted in the films, was the Japanese collaborators who encouraged the Japanese to torture the villagers for their personal gains. Playing the characters of Buang (“Sergeant Hassan”) and Hitam (“Matahari”), Salleh Kamil, was popular for playing the villain’s roles in the films produced by MFP. He depicted a realistic and convincing portrayals of the Japanese collaborator given that he had experienced⁵ the harsh treatment by the *kempeitai*⁶.

One could argue that although the background of the films was based on the Japanese occupation, the suffering of the people in these films, were mainly due to the treason acts of the local villains. Such a delicate handling of the wartime portrayal without actually placing a direct blame on the Japanese could be attributed to the diplomatic ties with the Japanese production companies which Shaw Brothers were attempting to forge in the 1950s.

At the time of the production of “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari”, the Shaw Brothers were, in fact, establishing its production collaboration with some of the Japanese studios, namely

Toho and Daiei. According to Yau (2010), the Shaw Brothers were working closely with these studios as they were eyeing for film distribution rights in Southeast Asia as well as obtaining the services of Daiei's colour films technology and techniques. Several co-productions were made between the Shaw Brothers' studios in Hong Kong with those from Japan. In other words, Shaw Brothers were aware of the importance of the diplomatic relationship with the Japanese for economic reasons.

In addition, the Shaw Brothers' interpretations of the Japanese occupation in both "Sergeant Hassan" and "Matahari" have led the authors to examine the production agenda of these films. The terms 'production agenda' in this article refer to the motives behind the production of the films. Inevitably, the Shaw Brothers' production agendas can be observed in depth from the advertising methods employed to promote the films.

Advertising the Films: Different Focuses Employed in the Printing Media of Different Languages

"Sergeant Hassan" in comparison to "Matahari" was given more advertisement spaces by the Malay Film Productions. Prior to its public screening, promotional materials in relation to "Sergeant Hassan" can be found in most of the major newspapers. However, in the case of "Matahari", its advertisements to promote the film were significantly less. This may explain the reason for why "Sergeant Hassan" was better known in comparison to "Matahari" despite the fact that they were produced by the same studio.

It is apparent that different advertising strategies were employed by Shaw Brothers in their attempt to appeal to different groups of potential audiences. The advertisement placed in English language newspapers were trying to sell these films in a triumphant tone for being the "first" either in the context of first war film⁷ made in Malaya ("Sergeant Hassan") or "the first authentic film about the Japanese occupation of Malaya" ("Matahari"). Meanwhile, promoting the Malay heroism by using the actor P. Ramlee and actress Maria Menado were on the agenda of the advertisements in the Malay language media. On the other hand, the promotional materials for the Chinese readers were focused on evoking their painful wartime memories during the Japanese occupation. These observable strategies demand further investigation.

The authors would like to start with the English promotional materials on "Sergeant Hassan". Besides promoting it as the first war film made in Malaya, evidence found suggests the

bravery of the Malay Regiment during the occupation as well as their involvement in the pre-production and production of the films. In fact, it was highlighted in the promotional materials that the money collected from the sale of tickets for “Sergeant Hassan” during its premier screening at the Capitol Theatre, will be donated to the Royal Malay Regiment welfare fund.

However, it is interesting to note that the film advertisements that were published in other vernacular languages newspapers had a different focus. For instance, in the “Utusan Melayu”, which was written in Jawi, highlighted the gallantry of a Malay hero as portrayed by P. Ramlee in his role as a member of the Malay Regiment. :

“P. Ramlee... Streaking... Attacking... Crashing...

With all his prowess and bravery in his greatest role as a member of the Malay Regiment – Sergeant Hassan⁸” (Utusan Melayu; August 21, 1958; p. 8)

In other words, the Malay language newspaper “Utusan Melayu” would capitalise on P. Ramlee’s legendary status instead of deploying the painful wartime experiences that were inflicted on the people by the Japanese Army. This promotional strategy was unlike those employed in the Chinese language media. For instance, the advertisements in the Chinese language media appealed to its readers by evoking their bitter sentiments during the war. For instance, the following lines were used to promote “Sergeant Hassan”:

“Japanese invaded with murders and rapes ... The Malay heroes from the Regiment fought the Japanese in war, presented in a brand new Malay language film ... The arrival of the Japanese (equalled to ghosts) inflicted unexplainable torments to the people” (Sin Chew Jit Poh; September 1, 1958: p. 5)

Another Shaw Brothers’ theatre advertisement reads:

“A painful memory for the Malayan. A serious lesson for the Japanese Armies” (Sin Chew Jit Poh; August 31, 1958: p. 4).

Concerning this archival research, it is found that the Malay Film Productions was in fact already aware of the ethnic policy that was put in place during the Japanese occupation. Since the Japanese treated the people differently according to their nationality or ethnic background, the memory of the people about the war differed too. By taking advantage of the socio-political condition of a multi-ethnic nation, Shaw Brothers employed distinct ethnic approaches to market “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari” to appeal to a vast number of possible audiences from various language background.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the same technique had altogether dwindled for “Matahari”, particularly in the Chinese media. In fact, the size of the advertisements appeared to

be far smaller in comparison to “Sergeant Hassan” which was screened three months earlier. A possible assumption is that the failure of “Sergeant Hassan” in attracting the Chinese audiences. Therefore, it was no longer financially beneficial to attract the Chinese audience for another film featuring a Malay actor.

In addition to the promotional materials, the audiences’ receptions of these two films can be a viable way to examine the films. In particular, how the contemporary viewers perceived these two films. The receptions of the audience can be captured from the film reviews or interviews about these films. Based on that, one can have access to the audiences’ reception of these films. However, the authors would like to emphasize that these reviews were mostly written by stakeholders who had important administrative roles in the government during that period. For instance, during the premier screening of the film, the late Tun Dato Abdul Rahman (the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, or then Malaya) recognised the film for promoting the gallantry acts of the Malay Regiment in defending Malaya and he later addressed the regiment’s contributions in fighting the communist. “Sergeant Hassan”. As published in *The Malay Mail* (August 27, 1958), Tun Dato Abdul Rahman stated that:

“was not just a film depicting the kind of Second World War but symbolised the fighting spirit and the gallantry of the men of the Royal Malay Regiment who fought and died in the defense of Malaya ... Shaw Brothers had brought the people a scene illustrative of a certain period in the proud history of the Royal Malay Regiment ... it was now 13 years since the Second World War ended but for ten years the regiment had had no respite, for they had been continually on active service engaged in the task of suppressing Communist terrorism” (p. 2).

It is clear that “Sergeant Hassan” was seen as a tool to promote the contribution of the Malay Regiment during the Japanese occupation while ignoring altogether what the MPAJA had done in fighting the Japanese. In addition, the Malay Regiment, at the time when the film was screened had already been actively engaged and therefore recognised for countering the MCP, a “terrorist” group which had to be wiped out from the national scene. This sentiment was also shared by Dato F. H. Brooke, the Major General of Federation Armed Force at that time, praising the film for authentically representing the undeniably outstanding fighting spirit of the Malay Regiment. In his review of the film, he was quoted as saying:

“This film is full of realism and depicts the type of difficult jungle action that was often fought against heavy odds in 1942-43 ... The film gives a good indication of the excellent fighting performance put up by these men” (Brooke; September 6, 1958: p. 8).

It seems like realism was the key term used in complimenting “Sergeant Hassan”, and “Matahari”. In a film review published in *The Straits Times*, Lackersteen, D. (November 30, 1958) celebrated the realist approach adopted by Ramon Estella, the Filipino director who helmed “Matahari”. According to Lackersteen, Ramon Estella’s “clever intercutting of the stock shots of bombing and actual scenes of the Jap (sic) advance into Malaya with his staged story make for realism in the extreme” (p. 13).

This idea was lauded by the scriptwriter and the actor himself. Abdul Razak, the scriptwriter of “Matahari” for instance, recounted in an interview that: “For the script itself, I interviewed numerous ex-prisoners of war, and members of the Resistance, so I am sure that the background is as authentic as possible” (Harmy, 1958: p. 5). On the other hand, Maria, the leading actress who had to assume a masculine-alike role in organising her guerrilla troops in “Matahari” explained:

“Matahari herself is an active character, who played a leading part in the resistance movement against the Japanese, and I feel that the role calls for a very skilful handling in order to convince the younger audiences that such scenes, as acted out in the film, did, in fact, took place in Malaya during the occupation” (Harmy, 1958: p. 4).

Despite the make-believe realist approach of “Matahari”, this had not rendered it the level of popularity on par with “Sergeant Hassan”. Although the number of advertisements for “Matahari” had been reduced, Shaw Brothers marketing strategies continued to be driven by their ethnic policy by focusing on distinct perspectives to attract the widest possible audiences from different languages and cultural backgrounds. Unlike those in the Chinese media, the advertisements in Malay language media did not seem to highlight the hardship experienced during the Japanese occupation.

As mentioned earlier, the number of advertisements for these two films were not allocated equally. Thus, this may have led to the varied degree of popularity the audiences then as well as the current audiences. Most importantly, it can be argued that it is the political agenda of the powers that be in underlining the Malay Regiment important contributions to fight the Japanese while not acknowledging the MPAJA that continually attract significant attention to “Sergeant Hassan” in comparison to “Matahari”.

CONCLUSION

Based on the examination of the recent airing of “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari” on television, plausible to assert that although “Matahari” was starred by a very popular actress and it was applauded for its realist approach, the film has already faded from the memory of the audience. In comparison to “Matahari”, “Sergeant Hassan” had repetitively resurfaced on television particularly during the month of August when Malaysia celebrate her Independence Day. This movie has always been used to showcase the patriotic contributions and gallantry acts of the Malay Regiment in fighting the Japanese armies during the occupation.

Looking from the historical perspective, the official history of the resistance of the Japanese rules was often portrayed from the authority-inclined perspective, namely the Malay regiment as well as the Force 136 as the heroes behind the Japanese’s surrender. In other words, the dichotomy of the official authority and the communists-inclined troops in resisting the Japanese can be clearly identified. As a result, this left the latter eliminated from the official account of the Malaysian history. By eliminating the contributions of the MPAJA, including in these two films – an alleged enemy of Malaysia for its rebellious moves during the struggle in achieving independent from her colonial master – it left no localised version of heroes, other than the Malay Regiment, in the narrative of nation building.

This explains the reason for the constant airing of “Sergeant Hassan” on the national broadcasting media RTM as well as on a local pay TV, Astro. Although the character of Hassan (P. Ramlee) is fictional, as in the case of Matahari (Maria Menado), the existence of the Malay Regiment is real and therefore unquestionable.

Meanwhile, this paper also examines the extensive promotional campaigns employed by Shaw Brothers in promoting “Sergeant Hassan” in comparison to “Matahari”. The campaigns were in fact in parallel with Shaw Brothers’ opportunist business approach by first working closely with the officers of the Malay Regiments from pre-production until the production of “Sergeant Hassan” and later promoting the film to a wider audience as the first war film made in Malaya (now Malaysia) just in time for the first anniversary celebration of Malaya’s Independence in 1958.

In addition, this article has also revealed that the Shaw Brothers had employed different advertising approaches in marketing both films. Audiences from different language backgrounds were addressed differently for the purpose of making profits out of their wartime experience.

These differences, to a certain degree, were later translated into different receptions to the popularly known “Sergeant Hassan” as well as the lesser known “Matahari”. All these strategies formed a complex relationship of socio-political and economic conditions that shaped the different receptions towards these films.

Shaw Brothers’ non-interference approach towards their Chinese opera troops performing plays with the anti-Japanese theme and later the use of their printing machineries to publish newspapers to celebrate the surrender of the Japanese armies, indicated their opportunistic business approach. The representation of the Japanese occupation in both “Sergeant Hassan” and “Matahari” was subtle. This was partly due to their indifference to the wartime experience in addition to their growing business territory by having collaborations with the Japanese studios during the making of the films. In a nutshell, Shaw Brothers were aware of the contemporary socio-political conditions and thus generate profits from these important historical events, namely the Japanese occupation and Malaya’s independent.

NOTES

- 1) Film viewing was conceived as an ethnically segregated activity based on the language of the film. In general, a Malay-language film was made to appeal to the Malay audiences.
- 2) Since the people who lived in Malaya, at that time, had mainly identified themselves with their motherland where they came from, such as India and China, their nationality was one of the identities which they could identify with.
- 3) Shaw Runme revealed that he had never participated in the Anti-Japanese movement led by a Chinese businessman, Tan Kah Kee.
- 4) “China Daily” according to Chua (1990) was sold 5 cents each and about 5, 000 newspapers were sold per day.
- 5) “During the Japanese rules, I had been victimised by the Japanese *kempeitai*. I was accused for selling prohibited goods. I cannot forget the ways they tortured me when I was detained. Since then, my memory of these *kempeitai* and their characters had never faded”, as obtained and translated from the production magazine published by Harny (1958) in the name of “Sergeant Hassan”, p. 8.
- 6) *Kempeitai* refers to the Japanese military police, a term which was commonly misused to refer to the Japanese collaborators.
- 7) “Eclipsing all other attractions in town! The first war film ever produced in Malaya!” as cited from a cinema advertisement published in “The Malay Mail” on August 21, 1958; p.4.
- 8) Original text reads: “*Meluru.. Menyerang.. Merempuh.. Dengan segala kehebatan dan keberanian dalam peranannya yang paling agong sebagai prajurit askar Melayu Sergeant Hassan*”.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yow Chong Lee is a film lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Apart from teaching courses he love most such as Film History, Film Theory and Criticism, Documentary Filmmaking, and Scriptwriting he also enjoys writing and researching on subjects in relation to film festivals and Southeast Asian Cinemas. Email: clyow@unimas.my

Candida Jau Emang serves as a film lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. She has been teaching courses such as Scriptwriting, Directing and Documentary filmmaking for not less than 10 years and hence reflecting her great interest in researching for subjects aforementioned. Email: jecandida@unimas.my

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