

ASIAN DRAMAS AND POPULAR TRENDS IN MALAYSIAN TELEVISION INDUSTRY

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Abstract

As one of the popular cultural products, television drama for many years has been an indispensable feature on television around the world. As early as 1970s' TV soap opera/melodrama have been significantly popular in the East Asia television industry. In the Malaysian context, television drama seems to be one of the major sources of entertainment for the local audience. In the 80s and 90s dramas were imported mainly from America, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Japan but subsequently from year 2000 onwards dramas from other parts of Asia and Latin America were also imported. The popularity of non western dramas in Malaysia, took precedent in the late 1990's and currently remains as one of the major sources of entertainment for local audience. Asian Dramas alongside local dramas became an important feature in Malaysian television industry with astronomical viewership ratings among local audience. With the development of this trend, this paper attempts to investigate the rapid expansion of ASIAN television dramas and analyse the push and pull factors that encourages its growth within the Malaysian television industry. More specifically, this paper critically examines the impact of imported Asian Dramas have had on television scheduling in Malaysia, principally the question of when and where these programs have dominated the schedules.

Keywords: *Asian Dramas, Popular Trend & Malaysian TV Industry*

DRAMA ASIAN DAN TREN POPULAR DALAM INDUSTRI TELEVISIEN MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Sebagai salah sebuah produk budaya popular, drama televisyen telah sekian lama menjadi elemen yang penting dalam siaran televisyen di seluruh dunia. Semenjak awal tahun 1970an lagi, soap opera/melodrama menjadi begitu popular dalam industri televisyen di rantau Asia Tenggara. Dalam konteks negara Malaysia, drama televisyen dapat dilihat sebagai salah satu sumber hiburan bagi penonton tempatan. Sekitar tahun 80 an dan 90 an sebahagian besar drama televisyen diimport daripada Amerika, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China dan Jepun tetapi menjelang tahun 2000, drama-drama daripada bahagian rantau Asia lain dan Amerika Latin juga mulai diimport. Populariti drama-drama ini menjadi corak tayangan utama sekitar akhir tahun 1990an dan sehingga kini menjadi salah satu ciri penting dalam industri penyiaran dinegara ini dengan sambutan yang amat memberangsangkan daripada penonton-penonton tempatan. Dengan perkembangan sedemikian, kertas kerja ini cuba mengkaji perkembangan Drama ASIAN yang giat berlaku ketika ini dan menganalisis faktor-faktor tarikan dan tolakan yang menggalakkan perkembangannya dalam industri televisyen di Malaysia. Secara spesifik, kertas kerja ini secara kritikalnya mengkaji impak hasil daripada pengimpotan drama-drama ini terhadap penjadualan televisyen di Malaysia, terutamanya mempersoalkan bila dan dimanakah rancangan-rancangan ini mendominasi penjadualan.

Kata kunci: *Drama Asian, Trend Popular dan Industri Televisyen Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

For many years television drama has been an indispensable feature on television around the world. As early as 1970s' the East Asian television industry has seen a significant rise in popularity of TV soap opera/melodrama (Chua and Iwabuchi, 2008). In recent years there was a proliferation of television dramas from Korea, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Apparently this particular Asian genre appeared to be well received by Asian audiences as indicated by the increase of various flows of television dramas within the Asian region (Cho, 2010).

In the Malaysian context, television drama seems to be one of the major sources of entertainment for the local audience. In the 80s and 90s dramas were imported mainly from America, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and Japan but subsequently from the year 2000 onwards dramas from other parts of Asia and Latin America were also imported. These imported dramas were aired alongside locally produced dramas that had high viewership ratings (Karthigesu, 1994; Md Azalanshah, 2011).

With the development of this trend, this paper attempts to investigate the rapid expansion of ASIAN television products within Malaysian television industry and critically examine the impact of imported Asian Dramas have had on television scheduling in Malaysia, principally the question of when and where these programmes have dominated the schedules.

DEVELOPMENT OF TELEVISION INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA

During the colonial period, the media had been used for different purposes. Those years preceding independence, the local media particularly print media had been used primarily in spreading nationalistic ideas and independence from colonial rule. In Malaysia today, the media continues its operation influenced by several factors in the society which include the social, economic and political. Offerings on radio and television are impinged upon by the multiethnic makeup of the society and diverse religious practices in the country. Radio and television have to cater to the needs and demands of the society in a way that do not create conflict among the diverse racial and religious groups. To facilitate that, the Ministry of Information provides guidelines to the state owned radio and television stations requiring them to promote policies and programs of the government; foster culture and civic consciousness and determines the type of entertainment being offered. In short, all broadcasting activities must promote government policies and fulfil aspirations of the government. This is expected of both informational and entertainment programmes.

There are two government owned national television stations, TV1 and TV2. TV1 was officially launched in 1963, after 5 years of the country's independence, with the establishment of Rangkaian Pertama (First Channel, also known as TV1). TV2 commenced operation in 1969.

In the last three decades the television industry has undergone tremendous changes, primarily due to various responses to local politics, economic and cultural situation (Karthigesu, 1994; Zaharom: 1996; Juliana, 1997). In 1983 with the introduction of Privatisation Policy, the first commercial TV station, TV3 was introduced which marked the beginning of the commercial television era. Subsequently with the government's liberalization policy, the number of channel operators proliferated in the 1990s (Meor Zailan, 1992 and Juliana, 2010).

With the advancement in technology, satellite TV was introduced in 1996. At the turn of the year, 2000 more licenses were approved to allow more private

radio and television stations to operate. This provided further impetus to the growth of the local broadcasting industry. Television stations introduced during this period included 8TV, TV9 and Fine TV. With hundreds of channels being offered in Malaysia, it has certainly encouraged greater competition amongst the different television stations for audience share to secure advertising revenues and eventually maximizing profit to survive in the industry. While the media have concerns over the media pie, the government on the other hand is concerned about how best for the ruling elite to retain their status quo, and this is invariably done by setting parameters that would allow only “safe media products” in a robust broadcast industry.

Media organizations in Malaysia have close ties with the ruling government through proxy ownership of the media. Through ownership of the media it is easy for the ruling elites to determine the content output and thereby limiting the choices of the audience. The ruling elite are not only concerned about maintaining its status quo but also about profit maximisation. It seems apparent that providing entertainment programmes that are non-contentious would not rock the boat for the ruling elite but at the same time provides the opportunities to maximise on the audience. Asian dramas were imported primarily because of the interesting storyline, the feel of cultural proximity and seem to be popular in the Asian region. Many of these dramas provide non-contentious themes and storylines.

ASIAN DRAMA AND MALAYSIAN CONTENT AND PROGRAMMING

Whilst Hollywood continues to play an important role in television scheduling in Malaysia, recent trend shows that the pattern of importation has also included a great deal of programmes from the eastern part of the world. Heavy importation of television dramas from ASEAN countries is fast becoming a new rule of the game in the Malaysian television industry.

Some researchers have observed that Malaysians audience finds the storylines and themes shown in Asian dramas to be more relevant to their daily lives than Hollywood dramas (Latiffah, Samsudin and Fauziah, 2009). Others assert that the actors and actresses with the whole package of looks and talents endears Malaysia audience to these dramas. Chua (2006) however notes that the similarities in look bring about a feeling of ‘Asianness’ but it blurs national identity.

Some of the dramas that have made a hit in Malaysia are *Winter Sonata*, *Jewel in the Palace* and *Autumn in My Heart* from Korea. According to the Managing Director of Korean Tourism Organization Kuala Lumpur, Yun Jae Jin, such dramas are successful in drawing a huge audience because the Korean film industry have invested heavily to ensure that cinematography is of high standard (The Edge Malaysia, 7 February 2011). These dramas present themes closely linked to traditional Korean values of ‘everlasting love’, ‘old-fashioned

romance', 'male chivalry' and 'filial piety' (Korean IT Times, 31 December 2005).

Indonesian Sinetrons are also very popular in Malaysia. Sinetrons are produced in Indonesia to meet the need of television stations for cheap alternatives especially during the financial crisis in the nineties (Aartsen, 2011). Sinetrons found a place also in the schedules of Malaysian television when in 2006, TV9 dedicated an Indonesian drama slot on a daily basis to ensure its competitiveness with other television stations. Indonesian dramas like *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* and *Mutiara Hati* enjoyed viewership of about 1.1 million and 1.6 million respectively (www.mediaprima.com.my)

These shows sometimes run for hundreds of episodes. A current example would be *Puteri Yang Ditukar* (175 episodes) which is aired on TV3 (<http://www.budiey.com>) and *Anugerah* which is now being aired on TV9 has about 470 episodes and *Cinta Fitri* also on TV9 has about 1000 episodes (www.kapanlagi.com). These dramas are normally slotted for daytime viewing on free-to-air Malaysian television channels. *Puteri Yang Ditukar* is currently being shown on TV3 in 'Slot Sinetron' at 2pm from Mondays to Thursdays, *Anugerah* is being shown on TV9 at 5.30pm from Mondays to Fridays and *Cinta Fitri* runs on TV9 at 12.30pm from Mondays to Thursdays (www.tv9.com.my). According to Rianna Poudyal, a former sinetron scriptwriter, people who watch sinetrons are housewives in need of daytime entertainment while going about doing household chores (www.thejakartaglobe.com). Interestingly, Rianna also noted in the same interview that most sinetrons in Indonesia are adaptations of Japanese, Korean and Indian movies or series. She asserts that the engaging plot in sinetrons combining romance and supernatural themes helps to sustain the interest of the viewers (Md Azalanshah, 2011).

With heavy investment in the Korean film industry and consequent aggressive marketing strategy, the Korean wave of cultural products like television dramas, pop music, films and games among others, throughout Asia (Cho, 2011) have caused other countries like China, Hong Kong and Taiwan to produce similar cultural products to compete in the global market (Shim, 2006). Korean pop culture is popular in Malaysia and Singapore (The Korea Herald, 4 March 2008). The Korean Wave in Malaysia is said to have begun with the airing of *Winter Sonata* on TV3 in 2002 (The Edge Malaysia, 7 February 2011).

Media Prima which is one of the largest media conglomerates that owns four free to air commercial television stations continues in its commitment to air dramas in its 2011 schedules. These dramas predominantly revolve around the themes of romance, family and corruption. From Hong Kong and Korea drama such as *Burning Flame 3*, *All Men Are Brothers*, *He's Beautiful*, *The Fugitive*, *Love & Dreams* continued to be imported for local audience viewing pleasure (www.mediaprima.com.my).

This commitment can be seen in the scheduling pattern of TV programs on Free-To-Air (FTA) TV channels in Malaysia which was observed during a period

of one week (1st of March to the 7th of March 2011). Content analysis is applied in analysing the data using quantitative approach concerning the percentage of genre, language, origin and airtime breakdown within and across free-to-air local television stations. This is done mainly to understand the implications of importation of television dramas on the scheduling which in turn reflects the current trend in the local broadcast industry in response to the latest development in television dramas within the Asian region. The results from the analysis are as below:

Table 1: Genre Breakdown of TV Programs Aired on FTA TV Channels from 1st to 7th of March 2012

Genre	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
Animation	4.4	20.0	18.1	30.0	3.0	27.4	17.2
Children	3.3	3.5	2.6	5.0	-	9.7	3.8
Comedy	-	3.5	0.9	-	-	-	0.9
Cooking/Food	-	1.7	3.4	3.8	3.0	1.6	2.3
Current Affairs	4.4	-	0.9	1.3	-	-	1.1
Documentary	24.2	2.6	3.4	1.3	1.5	4.8	6.4
TV Drama/TV Serial/Soap	5.5	8.7	21.6	8.8	27.3	12.9	13.8
Gameshow	-	0.9	0.9	2.5	7.6	-	1.7
Health	1.1	-	1.7	-	-	-	0.6
Info/Gossips	1.1	0.9	1.7	1.3	3.0	3.2	1.7
Magazine	5.5	8.7	5.2	5.0	3.0	1.6	5.3
Motivation	-	0.9	0.9	-	-	-	0.4
Movie	-	7.0	4.3	3.8	3.0	1.6	3.6
Music	1.1	1.7	1.7	-	6.1	-	1.7
News	4.4	2.6	3.4	3.8	4.5	1.6	3.4
Others	6.6	9.6	2.6	2.5	6.1	6.5	5.7
Reality TV	2.2	0.9	2.6	12.5	15.2	1.6	5.1
Religion	7.7	1.7	1.7	-	-	1.6	2.3
Sitcom	3.3	3.5	2.6	-	1.5	-	2.1
Sports	7.7	-	3.4	-	-	-	2.1
Talkshow	8.8	6.1	5.2	1.3	1.5	14.5	6.0
Telemovie	2.2	1.7	3.4	-	-	3.2	1.9
Travel	3.3	0.9	-	-	1.5	1.6	1.1

TV Series	3.3	10.4	2.6	12.5	7.6	6.5	7.0
Variety	-	2.6	5.2	5.0	4.5	-	3.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 1 shows the genre breakdown of all TV Programs aired on free-to-air (FTA) TV channels from the 1st to the 7th of March 2012. Out of a total of 530 programs analyzed, Animation is the highest category at 17.2%, followed closely by TV Drama which includes TV Serials and Soap Operas at 13.8%. TV Series is ranked third (7.0%) and Documentary fourth (6.4%). Motivational programs (0.48%) were the least aired within this period. TV drama is found to represent the highest percentage of genre within two channels; TV3 (21.6%) and 8TV (27.3%), whereas on TV1, it was the lowest at 5.5%. Most programs aired on TV1 were documentaries (24.2%), followed by talk shows (8.8%) and sports related programs (7.7%).

On the other hand, TV2 was found to air more programs which had lower representations on TV1. The highest genre on TV2 as shown above is Animation (20.0%) followed by TV Series (10.4%) and Others (9.6%). TV Drama was found to represent the highest number of programs on TV3 at 21.6%. At second place on TV3 is Animation (18.1%), followed by Variety, Magazine and Talk show at 5.2% each. On ntv7, the highest genre is Animation (30%) followed by TV Series and Reality TV at 12.5% each and TV Drama at 8.8%. Besides TV dramas which represent the highest number of programs on 8TV (27.3%), other programs aired by 8TV were Reality TV (15.2%), Game shows (7.6%) and TV Series (7.6%). The top three genres on TV9 were Animation (27.4%), Talk show (14.5%) and TV Drama (12.9%). TV Drama represented the highest percentage on two channels (TV3 and 8TV) and the third highest on two other channels (ntv7 and TV9), making it the second highest genre overall across all six FTA TV channels in Malaysia throughout the period of analysis.

Table 2: Language Breakdown of TV Dramas Aired on FTA TV Channels from 1st to 7th of March 2012

Language	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
Cantonese	-	10	-	-	-	-	1.37
English	-	-	-	14.29	-	-	1.37
Hokkien	-	-	-	14.29	33.33	-	8.22
Indonesian	-	-	12	-	-	27.27	8.2
Korean	-	10	-	14.29	6.66	-	4.11
Malay	100	50	76	-	6.66	72.72	52.1

Mandarin	-	10	-	57.14	53.33	-	17.81
Spanish	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Tagalog	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Tamil	-	20	-	-	-	-	2.74
Thai	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2 shows the language breakdown of TV dramas aired on free-to-air (FTA) TV channels from the 1st to the 7th of March 2012. More than half of the dramas shown were aired in Malay representing the highest percentage at 52.1%. This is followed by Mandarin (17.81%) and Hokkien (8.22%). TV1 was found to air only dramas in Malay. Although 76% of the dramas on TV3 were in Malay, there were also dramas in other languages like Indonesian (12%), Spanish (4%), Tagalog (4%) and Thai (4%). TV3 and TV 2 are the stations with the most varied number of languages. Dramas in Mandarin were found to represent the highest percentage on ntv7 and 8TV at 57.14% and 53.33% respectively.

Table 3: Origin Breakdown of TV Dramas Aired on FTA TV Channels from 1st to 7th of March 2012

Origin	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
China	-	-	-	-	13.33	-	2.74
Hong Kong	-	10	-	-	-	-	1.37
Indonesia	-	-	12	-	-	27.27	8.2
Korea	-	10	-	14.29	13.33	-	5.48
Malaysia	100	80	76	28.57	6.66	72.72	58.9
Philippines	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Singapore	-	-	-	-	20	-	4.11
Spain	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Taiwan	-	-	-	42.86	46.67	-	13.70
Thailand	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
USA	-	-	-	14.29	-	-	1.37
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 3 shows the origin breakdown of TV Dramas aired on free-to-air (FTA) TV channels from 1st to 7th of March 2012. About 60% of the dramas shown on FTA TV channels in Malaysia were locally produced. The remaining 40% is made up of dramas imported from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea,

Philippines, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand and USA. The highest number of dramas was imported from Taiwan (13.7%) followed by Indonesia (8.2%) and Korea (5.48%). All dramas aired on TV1 were locally made, followed by TV2 and TV3 at 80% and 76% each. Almost half of dramas shown on ntv7 and 8TV were sourced from Taiwan at 42.86% and 46.67% respectively. TV9 only aired dramas which are either locally made (72.72%) or imported from Indonesia (27.27%). The channel with the lowest number of locally produced dramas as shown above is 8TV at 6.66%.

Table 4: Airtime Breakdown of TV Dramas on FTA TV Channels from 1st to 7th of March 2012

Airtime	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
Daytime (8.00am-7.00pm)	80	50	48	71.43	80	63.64	61.64
Primetime (7.00pm-10.00pm)	-	-	16	14.29	6.67	18.18	10.96
Latenight (10.00pm-6.00am)	20	50	36	14.29	13.33	18.18	27.40
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4 shows the airtime breakdown of TV dramas on free-to-air (FTA) TV Channels from the 1st to the 7th of March 2012. TV dramas were found to be mostly shown during daytime (61.64%) as compared to late night (27.40%) or primetime (10.96%). Only a small percentage of the dramas were aired during prime time, between 7pm to 10pm. TV2 aired an equal amount of dramas during daytime as well as late night and there was no drama aired during prime time, which is also the case for TV1. TV3, ntv7, 8TV and TV9 aired their dramas during all three sections of day parting with the highest number of dramas aired at daytime. Only 14.29% and 6.67% dramas were aired on ntv7 and 8TV respectively during primetime. TV3 shows the highest number of dramas aired during primetime across all channels at four dramas per week (16%).

It is evident that TV drama is a prominent genre on Malaysian television. There were more local dramas as compared to imported ones and this is congruent with what has been noted by Zaharom (1996:173) that Malaysian television witnessed the ‘mushrooming’ of locally produced programs designed to promote the Malaysian culture and to enhance nation building in this country. His study revealed that the percentage of locally produced programmes has increased

tremendously particularly on TV1 and TV3. Similarly, Wang and Mustafa (1996:268-269) also pointed out that the government's policy of encouraging local content, have increased a daily fare of locally produced content broadcast daily on TV1 and TV3. Subsequently, TV1 and TV3 started to air entertainment programmes produced locally by private Chinese and Tamil filmmakers.

The government announced its aspiration that by the year 2000 the ratio of local to imported programmes on Malaysian television should reach 80:20 (Ramlah Jalee, 1998). The production of local dramas has gradually increased and local television stations like TV3 has started to dedicate more slots for the broadcast of locally produced dramas such as Drama Suria, Identiti and Samarinda (<http://www.utusan.com.my>). The popularity of local Malay dramas was also astounding as in the case of Nurkasih on TV3 which had reportedly attracted 19 million viewers (<http://www.hmetro.com.my>). Nurkasih is a story centred upon a Malay family with the themes of rural versus urban, love and religion at its core.

The popularity of local dramas is not surprising and is explicable by cultural proximity as audience prefer watching programmes which they can easily identify with in terms of issues, language and looks, among others (Straubhaar, 2007). Looking at the strong appeal of local dramas, it is safe to say that it has indeed come a long way and is a worthy contender in the current scenario. However, Zaharom (1996:173) contends that despite the increase in local programming in the 1990s, a majority of these programmes such as drama, situation comedies, and musical programmes were simply a pale imitation of western genre. These local dramas may have a local facade but many of these dramas are copycat versions of western dramas.

The proliferations of a variety of television dramas from the different origin seemed to have some sort of influence in the consumption patterns of the local audience. In terms of preferences for television dramas, it had been observed that in the 80s and 90s, American soaps, Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, and Japanese dramas were popular amongst the Malaysian audience. In fact, Japanese dramas were popular up until the early 2000 due to the huge influx of Japanese dramas during this time which attracted high ratings (Karthigesu, 1994; Hussein, 2001 cited in Md Azalanshah, 2011).

The early 2000 also exhibited an interesting trend in audience taste in watching television dramas. Heavy importations of television series from the neighboring countries, such as a popular romance drama Pangako Sayo from the Philippines and Phoenix Blood from Thailand managed to captivate the interest of local audience (Md. Azalanshah, 2011). Alongside these dramas, Latin America's Telenovelas typically from Brazil and Mexico had also received favourable response from Malaysian audience. The ratings for these telenovelas were reported about 400,000 to 900,000 per episode (Farinnordin, 2003). The peak of its success came with the screening of Rosalinda, with 1.1 million viewers per episode (Utusan Malaysia, 3 February 2003).

In the recent years, Malaysians are served with an assortment of television dramas from various regions while local dramas slowly gaining popularity and its success were prominent in mid 2000s. At the same time Korean and Indonesian Sinetron started easing into local television industry. This added to the diffusion of foreign dramas in the local scene.

To this end it seems that viewing activities and audience preference in Malaysia are a mix between the western and eastern dramas. While western dramas such as American serials were popular in the 80s and Latin American telenovelas were popular in early 2000, in the recent years, Malaysian audience had somehow exhibited a shift in their taste of preference in watching the drama with heavy demand for Asian television dramas originating from Korea, Indonesia and even from within the country itself.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of 40 years, there have been significant changes in the landscape of television industry in Malaysia since it first began in 1963. Television programming was initially fed by western imported programmes to help nurture the development of local industry. Over the years, it was evident that there have been constant changes in the types and origin of television programming in response to various political, economic and cultural situations.

Although these various factors play significant role in determining the nature of the television programmes, television dramas, has always been part and parcel of Malaysian television industry. Its popularity is undeniable. In the early years, imported television dramas from the west (America) were preferred in Malaysia due to the economic reason as they are cheap and able to attract high ratings. Locally produced dramas in those years were very limited and poor in quality. In the commercialization era in the 1980s, the pattern of importation of television dramas has grown to include dramas from the east. More dramas were sourced mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan targeted to Chinese viewers. Local produce television dramas only started to get the support from the industry in 1990s in response to government policies to encourage the development of local dramas.

Nonetheless, despite the hype of the Korean wave, the scheduling shows that Malaysian audience are still served with a bigger diet of Sinetrons from Indonesia and Taiwanese dramas as compared to Korean ones. One probable cause would be Malaysians identify more easily in terms of language with Indonesian and Mandarin or Hokkien than Korean due to cultural resemblance (Straubhaar, 2007). It seems that the local television industry attempts to conform to government policy of local content airing more local productions than imported ones and when complemented with imported programmes, the pattern leans towards dramas which are more culturally similar. The bigger pictures seem to suggest that Asian dramas are popular but locally produced dramas take precedent over Asian Dramas.

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