

FILM CENSORSHIP IN MALAYSIA: SANCTIONS OF RELIGIOUS, CULTURAL AND MORAL VALUES

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Abstract

Malaysia is one of the countries in the world that practices film censorship. The prevailing film censorship laws in Malaysia not only deal with all imported films, trailers and documentaries, but they also encompass the production and exhibition of local Malay films. A Film Censorship Board was established to censor or ban films infringing any religious, cultural and moral values of the Malaysian society, prior to public viewing. This paper outlines the evolution of film censorship in Malaya/Malaysia and discusses examples of several Malay films censored or banned on the grounds contradictory to religious, cultural and moral values set by the Board.

Abstrak

Malaysia merupakan salah sebuah negara di dunia yang mengamalkan penapisan filem. Undang-undang penapisan filem yang sedia ada di Malaysia bukan sahaja menangani semua filem, treler dan dokumentari yang diimport, tetapi juga meliputi penerbitan dan tayangan filem Melayu tempatan. Lembaga Penapisan Filem ditubuhkan bagi menapis dan mengharamkan filem yang bertentangan dengan nilai agama, budaya dan moral masyarakat Malaysia, sebelum dibenarkan ditayangkan kepada umum. Kertas ini menggariskan evolusi penapisan filem di Malaya/Malaysia dan membincangkan contoh beberapa filem Melayu tempatan yang ditapis atau diharamkan atas alasan yang bercanggah dengan nilai agama, budaya dan moral yang ditetapkan oleh Lembaga.

Keywords: film censorship, Malay films, religious, cultural, moral values

Introduction

The earliest film was said to arrive in the Malay States as early as 1898 (Lent 1978). Among them was a documentary on Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee that was held in London on 20th June 1897. However, the first two local Malay films were only produced 40 years later, in 1938, which are *Laila Majnun*, produced by Motilal Chemical Company, starring Tijah, Syed Ali Alattas and M. Suki, and another film, *Nelayan* (Fisherman), starring Khairuddin (Hamzah Hussin 2004). *Laila Majnun* was a hit amongst the Malays as the dialogues were totally in Malay even though the producer was an Indian national.

The British colonials who ruled Malaya introduced control policy and film censorship to uphold and defend their dignity and *status quo* as the "Master" in the occupied territory (O'Higgins 1972). Van Der Heide (2002) strongly believes that the main legacy left by the British to the Malay States was not the practices of film production, but the control of the

production, i.e. the film censorship system. In effect, the system was not born in Malaysia but merely an aspect of colonial domination and imperialism in general (Wan Amizah WM 2008). Initially, films were brought into Malaya as a form of entertainment for English officers and colonist administrators. Many Western films, especially from Hollywood, displayed scenes of unacceptable standards by most Asian society and culture, for example, the scene where an Englishwoman drank alcohol and being fondled by another man other than her husband.

Media development theoretical framework

Ever since the mass media were invented more than a century ago, communication scholars have been constantly striving for the understanding of media effects. In the early stage of the development of mass communication theory in the late nineteenth-century, there were two contradictory views on the roles played by media. One was the optimistic view of elevating the quality of human life while the other was the pessimistic view of looking at media as the destroyer of social orders. The Mass Society Theory with its philosophy of powerful effects emerged then to explain the impacts and the meanings of media intrusion to the mass society and the mass culture. The proponents of this media theory believed in the persuasive effects of media in promoting homogeneity in society. However, there were scholars who claimed that the media would be deemed as an extremely effective tool, either for good or for bad, in dictating the behaviours of the so-called passive audience.

The powerful impact of media was questioned by many social scientists in the communication schools. Paul Lazarsfeld as cited in Baran & Davis (2003) propagated the scientific perspective on mass communication with the assertion of conducting thoroughly designed research to ascertain the media influence with the measurement of its magnitude.

In olden days, the media were deemed as powerful in influencing the so-called passive audience. Those who were in power (government) were always sceptical of the media as according to them, the media might change the social order (pessimistic view); hence threatening their existing power. Regulation and censorship were tools to control or reduce such threat. However, with such policy it tarnishes the aesthetic value of a film.

The evolution of censorship laws in Malaya/ Malaysia

The Film Censorship Act in Malaysia has gone through a long evolutionary process. Indeed, it has been indirectly started since the building of public stage to perform theatrical plays, *bangsawan* (Malay classical theatre) and Chinese *Mendu* theatre (Wan Abdul Kadir 1988). The rudimentary Theatre Ordinance 1895 focussed more on stage security and operations, but early censorship policies began to take form when every stage show had to apply for a licence or performance permit. The first legal policy enacted on film content and its negative effect on audience was the Theatre Ordinance 1908 (Amendment) No. II of 1912 (Straits Settlements). Police were authorised to determine suitable scenes for public viewing and they were allowed to raid and seize unauthorised films.

Censorship as a form of control was actively implemented after a publication which became the catalyst for Malaya's censorship system and policy, namely an article entitled "The Cinema in The East: Factor in the Spread of Communism" by Sir Hesketh-Bell in *The Times* dated September 18, 1926 (Bell 1926). This article caught the attention of King George V, the ruler of Britain and her entire colony (CO 273/533/18384 1926a). The King decreed the Colonial Office to investigate claims that films shown in the East had tarnished the image of the West, and "to put a stop to these horrible exhibitions ...". The Colonial Office disputed

the claim, and assured that the censorship rules imposed in the Malay States were adequately implemented (CO273/533 18384 1926b).

By the provisions of the Cinematograph Film Ordinance No. 76 of 1952 in the Federation of Malaya and the Cinematograph Film Ordinance No. 25 of 1953 in Singapore, a Censorship Board was officially established on 8th January, 1954, with Mrs. Cynthia Koek as its first chairperson. The Board’s office was situated in Singapore, but its functions and duties covered the entire Malaya and Singapore (Cynthia Koek 1954-1958). The withdrawal of Singapore from Malaysia to be an independent nation of its own in 1965 has created an impact because the Censorship Board head office was centralized in Singapore. Thus, a Malaysian Film Censorship Board was established in Kuala Lumpur in 1966 as the implementer of film censorship policy and system for Malaysia, including for Sabah and Sarawak.

The materials censored by Censorship Board include trailers, newsreel, posters, advertisements, technical and short comedy film, apart from feature films. The panel of Censorship Board consisted of at least three members and the Ordinance provided that no Board member was allowed to individually instruct a cut or ban of any film. Approvals were imprinted with the Board’s seal on the film negative prior to public exhibition.

Any decision to ban or to cut parts of a film shall be informed to the owner of the film in writing, and details shall be provided on the scenes to be cut. The owner of the film had to reply in writing whether he agreed to the cuts and that the scenes be cut by himself or by the Censor. If he chooses to cut the scenes himself, the film has to be submitted to the Censorship Board again for review. If the owner disagreed with the cuts requested by the Censorship Board, then he had the rights to appeal to the Censorship Appeal Committee (Cynthia Koek 1954-1958).

Before the decision to totally ban any film was made, the film was usually previewed a few times by the Board members to ensure that it might be released with minor cuts without disrupting the linearity of plot, action and dialogue of the film. However, if banning is inevitable, the owner shall be informed in writing on the reason for banning. The owner has the rights to submit an application to the Appeal Committee to review any decisions made by the Censorship Board.

Examples of censorship of Malay films

Examples of Malay films banned and censored by the Film Censorship Board on the grounds of religious, cultural and moral values are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Banned and Censored Malay Films

No.	Category of censorship	Title of film	Year of production
1	Religious	<i>Noor Islam</i> (Eponym)	1960
		<i>Rumah Itu Duniaku</i> (Home Sweet Home)	1964

		<i>Fantasia/ Fantasi</i> (Fantasy)	1991
2	Cultural	<i>Durjana</i> (Evil)	1960's
		<i>Amuk</i> (Running Amok)	1995
3	Moral	<i>Akademi Seni</i> (Academy of Art)	1988

Source: Wan Amizah WM (2008)

1. Films censored on religious grounds

One Malay fiction film censored by the Malaya Censorship Board on religious reasons was the film titled *Noor Islam*, a 1960 production directed by KM Basker. It was produced by Cathay Keris Film starring Nordin Ahmad, Salmah Ahmad, Siput Sarawak, Mahmud June and Shariff Medan. The film was censored on the grounds that it was derogatory to the Hindu religion (Hamzah Hussin, 2004). It was the story of a non-Islamic country which believed in pantheism and worshipped temples. However, a minority of the citizens embraced Islam and they practiced in secret. Eventually the king himself converted to Islam, influenced by his Muslim palace maidens. While Islam gradually grew, the state ministers who were staunch believers in pantheism concocted a trickery to deceive the people. Nevertheless, the princess unravelled the wicked intention and the entire kingdom converted to Islam. The film was submitted to the Council of Hindu Advisors of Singapore, in reference to a scene proclaiming 'Om Om' in a temple. Approval would be granted for *Noor Islam* provided its producer, Cathay Keris, changed the proclamation 'Om Om' to other words. Once the change was made, the film was approved for public viewing.

Another film banned by the Censorship Board on religious grounds was a film titled *Rumah Itu Duniaku* (Home Sweet Home), a 1964 production and a screenplay by Hamzah Hussain. The film was an adaptation of a novel of similar title and was expected to hit the cinemas during the Eidul Fitr celebration that year. In his own autobiography, Hamzah Hussain revealed the reasons behind the ban (Hamzah Hussain 2004). According to Hamzah, his film *Rumah Itu Duniaku* was censored by the Censorship Board for two reasons. The first is the act showing the children of a deceased man weeping and wailing next to their father's body. The decision was made by a Censor from the Johore Islamic Religious Department (Johore is the southern-most state of Malaysia and situated north of Singapore). In the Islamic law, the act of weeping and wailing of a dead body is extremely prohibited as it was deemed to excruciate the deceased. As the screenwriter, Hamzah himself had to confront the Censorship Board officer to explain his rationale in putting in the scene. It was logical and customary for any Malay family to weep and wail during a funeral. For him, audience would feel something amiss if they watched a solemn and quiet funeral with family members in a sombre mood during their father's funeral. The weeping and wailing scene could also enhance the sound effect and touch the emotions of any film or theatre audience. However, the Censor persisted by its decision and expressed that any human logic could not replace a holy rights and therefore the scene had to be censored prior to public viewing (Hamzah Hussain 2004).

The second reason for the banning of the film was the scene when the word "*sial*" (jinx) was spoken by one of the actors. Hamzah argued to the Censor that the word was uttered because

the character believed that every misfortune that befell her family was due to the “jinx” manifested in another character in the film. The rationale was accepted by the Censor and the film was subsequently approved.

Another local Malay film banned by Censorship Board and even upon appeal, was banned too by the Appeal Committee, was *Fantasia*, directed by Aziz M. Osman and produced by Zain Mahmud in 1991. It was a story of *Silbi* (a misnomer for Iblis or Satan) who raped and sucked blood of young virgins during full moon as a prerequisite for eternal longevity. One of his victims, Dara, requested help from Kana for revenge. Kana inserted Dara’s soul into a ring, which then fell into the hands of Nora, a reporter investigating cases of raped girls during full moon. With the help of her fiancée, Rahmat, and her friend Azrin, Nora eventually managed to destroy *Silbi*.

Wan Hassan (1994) in his studies on film censorship in Malaysia with special focus on religious and moral censorship concluded that *Fantasia* was banned for its mystical elements which contradicted Islamic principles. The Censorship Board requested the film producer to cut a few scenes, and after censoring, the producer changed the film’s title to *Fantasi*. Among the scenes which were asked to be cut were the pledge dialogue between Nora and Dara, the act where Dara’s soul entered Nora’s body and Kana’s explanation on the genesis of *Silbi*. However, the latter version was still banned even upon appeal. The Appeal Committee members consisted of four religious advisors and *mufti* (Muslim clerics), whereby three of them agreed that only a few scenes need to be cut but one of them totally disagreed to approve the film; therefore the film *Fantasi* was still banned.

According to Wan Hassan, in a desperate attempt to save his production, the producer, Zain Mahmud, had gone to see the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamed. The Prime Minister agreed to intervene and requested that the Appeal Committee reconsider their decision. In the end, the film was approved with a few cuts and allowed for public viewing in 1994.

2. Films censored on cultural values

An example of a film censored on the grounds of violence was the film *Durjana* (Evil), produced by Omar Rojik in 1971. It was a story of a *joget* dancer named Zaharah whose gangster boyfriend is being hunted down by the police. At the end of the film, the police found his hiding place and when he felt trapped, he refused to be apprehended by the police. Decidedly, he put a pistol to his head and shot himself. The film *Durjana* was banned for three reasons: first, the police resisted any act of gangsterism, which could influence youths at the time; second, the police opposed the shooting scenes between police and gangsters for this might demonstrate to the audience on ways to violate the law and defy police orders; third, the suicide scene at the end of the story could instil a negative effect on the audience. The Censor believed the scenes might influence audience not to surrender to the police although they had committed a crime and when in a jam, the film taught the audience to find an easy way out by committing suicide. The director, Omar Rojik could not believe that the film was banned because the scenes showed a true story, i.e. a gangster would shoot a policeman and the suicide itself was a re-enactment when a gangster became extremely desperate by his own actions (Ho 1991).

Another film banned by the Censorship Board for its violent theme was the film *Amuk* (Running Amok), directed by Adman Salleh and produced in 1995. As the title of the film indicated, the main actor in the story, Wan Man played by Nasir Bilal Khan, ran amok in the

village and this was deemed too violent by the members of the Censorship Board committee. Therefore, the producer was requested to reduce the number of stabbing made by Wan Man onto another actress, Natalie, in the film prior to consent for public exhibition (Ho 1991).

3. Films censored on immoral values

A musical film banned by the Censorship Board on grounds of socially-ill representation and contained elements of “yellow culture” was a 1988 film *Akademi Seni* (Academy of Art), produced by Amir Corporation and directed by Johari Ibrahim. The film revolves around the daily lives of an art school students in a city. Ho (1991) interviewed the director, Johari Ibrahim, who was inspired to create this film by his own experience living in Japan. According to Johari, all young people love western culture and in Japan, the young generation will dance rock and roll in the middle of the road in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo on weekends.

However, the Censorship Board instructed that many scenes of the films had to be cut, for example the scenes where students were drinking alcohol and getting drunk, the scene where students were dancing rock and roll in a wild manner in public, the scene when a student and his girlfriend were swimming in a swimming pool in a very close proximity, and the scene when a male student with an ulterior motive invited a lady teacher to pillion ride his motorcycle. The film producer submitted an appeal to the Censorship Appeal Committee to retain the film in its original form, upon realising that when all the scenes required to be cut were made, the remnants of the film became too short and lost its storyline. Thus, when the Appeal Committee reviewed the earlier version of the film, not only they rejected the appeal from the producer, they also banned the entire film from being shown throughout Malaysia. The producer then applied for the film to be released from Censorship Board to be exported to Singapore, in the hope of recovering part of his investments.

Control of religious, cultural and moral values

In Malaysia, films are regarded as a government arm, and therefore films must function in line with the government’s needs (Fuziah Kartini & Raja Ahmad Alauddin 2003). If a film was found hostile towards the government’s policies and aspirations, the film had to be censored or banned for public viewing. The film censorship systems and policies in Malaysia were created when the government wanted to control all forms of entertainment shown to the people. From decisions on what can or cannot be staged by *bangsawan*, *wayang kulit* and *mendu* movies, the control continued in the form of film censorship when films became more popular in Malaya. Filmmakers and distributors are required to apply for permits or licences to import films, and in the past, local film producers were required to get screenplay approval prior to recording, while foreign film producers needed to apply for permits to conduct any film shootings in Malaysia.

The Malaysian film Censors have a general guideline in doing their work, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The guidelines contain a set of rules on any acts, scenes, dialogues, visuals and themes that can or could not be passed based on the following aspects:

- a) Religious. Among elements that are forbidden are:-
 - Having the effect of anti-God, polytheism of Allah and anti-religion in all forms and manifestations
 - offending other religions
 - contradicting the Islamic rules (*fatwa*) and regulations by the State Islamic Councils

- b) Cultural. The following are prohibited:
- unsuitable, deteriorating and endangering Malaysian norms and values
 - damaging the character and behaviour of the society
 - giving a misconception on the cultural development in Malaysia
 - influencing the audience towards immoral, perverted and evil acts
- c) Moral. The values to be taken into consideration :-
- to portray immoral acts;
 - the modus operandi of wickedness
 - gain sympathy of audience towards the actor and immoral acts
 - the winning of evil over justice and truth
 - to glorify excessive cruelty and brutality
 - to emphasize solely or excessively on sexual acts
 - to show or allow the use of illegal drugs and psychotropic drugs
 - to induce sentiments of religious, ethnic and classes of society

Conclusion

The curious affair between Malay/Malaysian films with the censorship board is traceable in the genealogy and history of the country and ultimately the nation. What this illuminates is the need for the country to keep redefining its role and identity, marking its inevitable severance from the colonial master. In achieving a complete separation, the markers of sovereignty find its meaning in the religion, and moral as well as cultural ownership of its citizen. Religion, moral conduct and cultural identities hence are modulated into the pillars that hold the country with multicultural make up together; the Censorship Board then becomes a visibly conflicting manifestation of the *status quo*'s need to be able to keep doing this. A sanction thus is a necessity. As a form of social control, the Censorship Board is usually perceived as a moral police, and this is aptly explained by the framework used in this paper, reflecting the tendency to treat the media as having pernicious effects on the passive audience. The censorship in Malaysia, in a nutshell, not unlike the nation itself, is still a work on progress.

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