

# The Early Film Industry: The Films & The Entrepreneurs

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# Learning Objectives:

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- To debate on the “originality” of films
- To explain and discuss:
  - the *development* of the early film industry (how it came about)
  - the *effects of Japanese Invasion* on the film industry in Malaya and Singapore

# The Debate of Origin

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- How do you define the originality of a film?
- Does it lie on...
  - The *location* of the film being shot?
  - The *language* of the film?
  - The *narrative* of the film – what culture does it base?
  - The *nationality* of the director, actors, producers and film crew?

# The Complex Cultural Interaction

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- Is there any “pure” or “original” culture?
- It is, however, agreed that film production in Malaya (and Malaysia) epitomises and heralds *the complex cultural interactions* that happen to occur all the time.



# THE EXHIBITION OF INDONESIAN FILMS

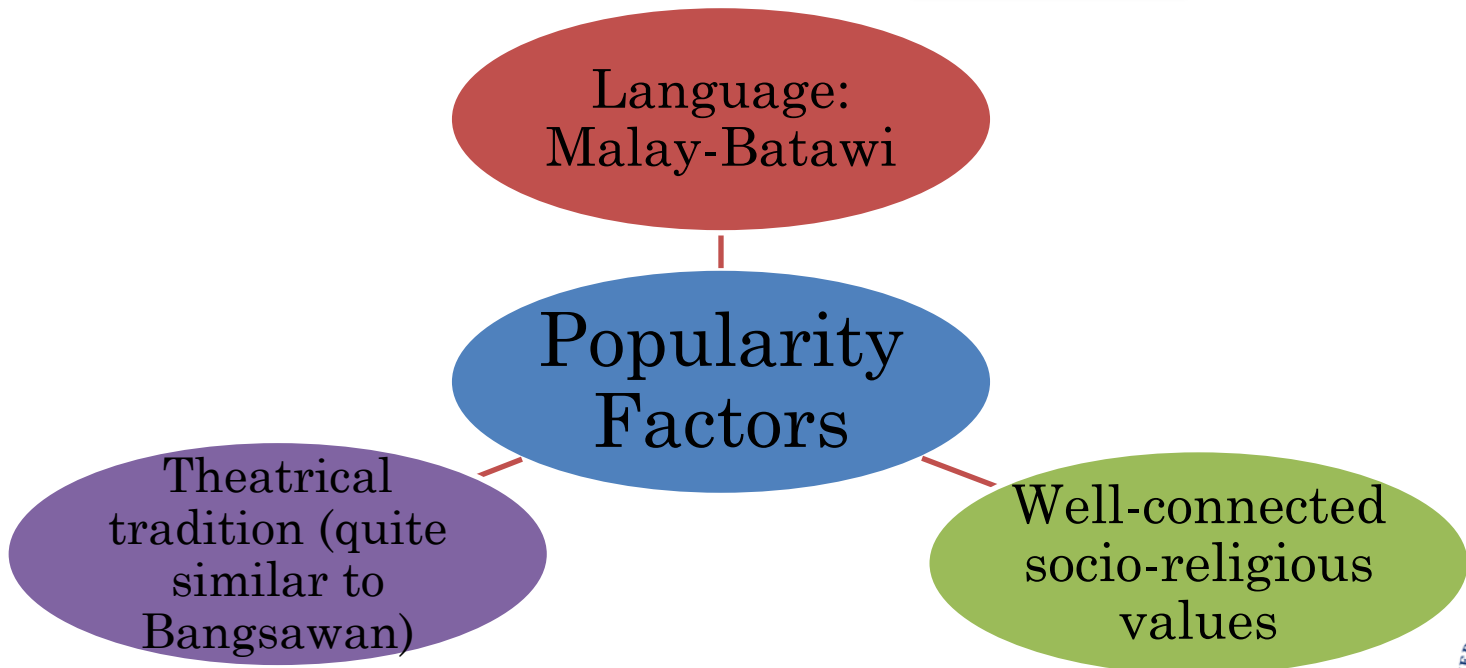
They Inspired the Making of “Local” Films



Contemporary and Forward Looking

# The Acceptance of Indonesian Films

- Between 1930 and 1941, *almost all of the Indonesian films* produced were brought into Singapore and the Peninsular. **WHY?**



# The Popular Indonesian Films

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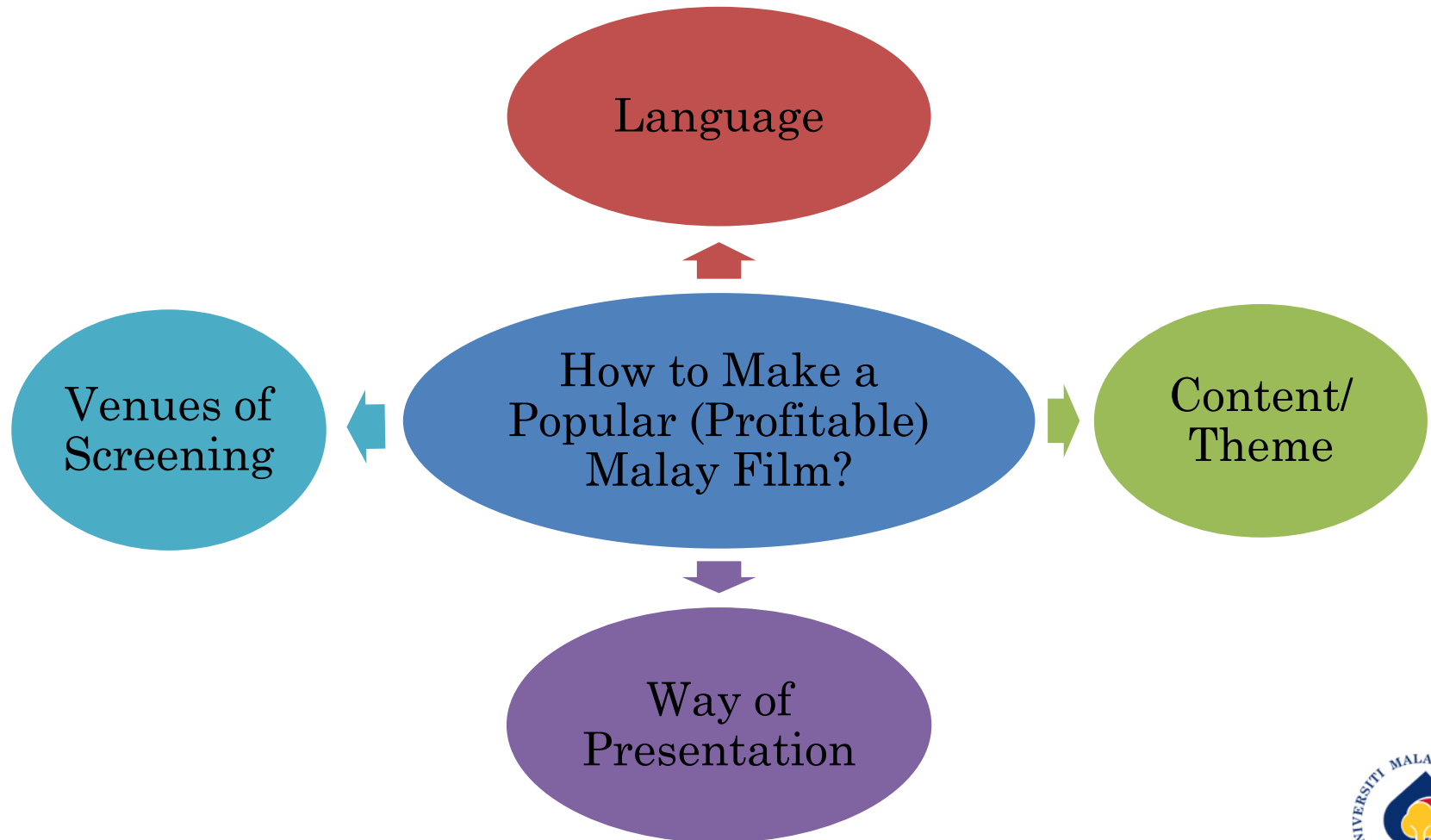
- The popularity of the films from Indonesia may well have been the *stimulus* for the production of local Malay film.
- Example of popular Indonesian films:
  - **Terpaksa Menikah (1932)**
  - **Terang Boelan (1938)**
  - **Alang-Alang (1938)**

These films share some similarities.  
What are they?



# The Magic Formula?

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# The 1<sup>st</sup> Local Film?!

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- Around 1933 – 1934, ***B.S. Rajhan*** managed to convince an Indian businessman named S.M. Chisty to produce a film called ***Laila Majnun***.
- Laila Majnun was directed by B.S. Rajhans with crew from ***India***.

# The Hybrid of Persian-Indian Story

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- Majnun, in the story, pines away in loneliness for his absent lover, Laila who wanders through the bazaars singing her praises. Majnun eventually becoming a madman.
- “Laila Majnun” was in fact a *remake of an Indian film* which was originally *taken from a popular love-story of the Arabian tale*.

What can you conclude?

# The Acceptance of Laila Majnun

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- “Laila Majnun” was *first screened at the Alhambra* in Singapore.
- Despite the success of the film, it was *not shown widely* owing to *problems with the distribution and cinema*, thus, it did not prove profitable.

The History of the Rich...

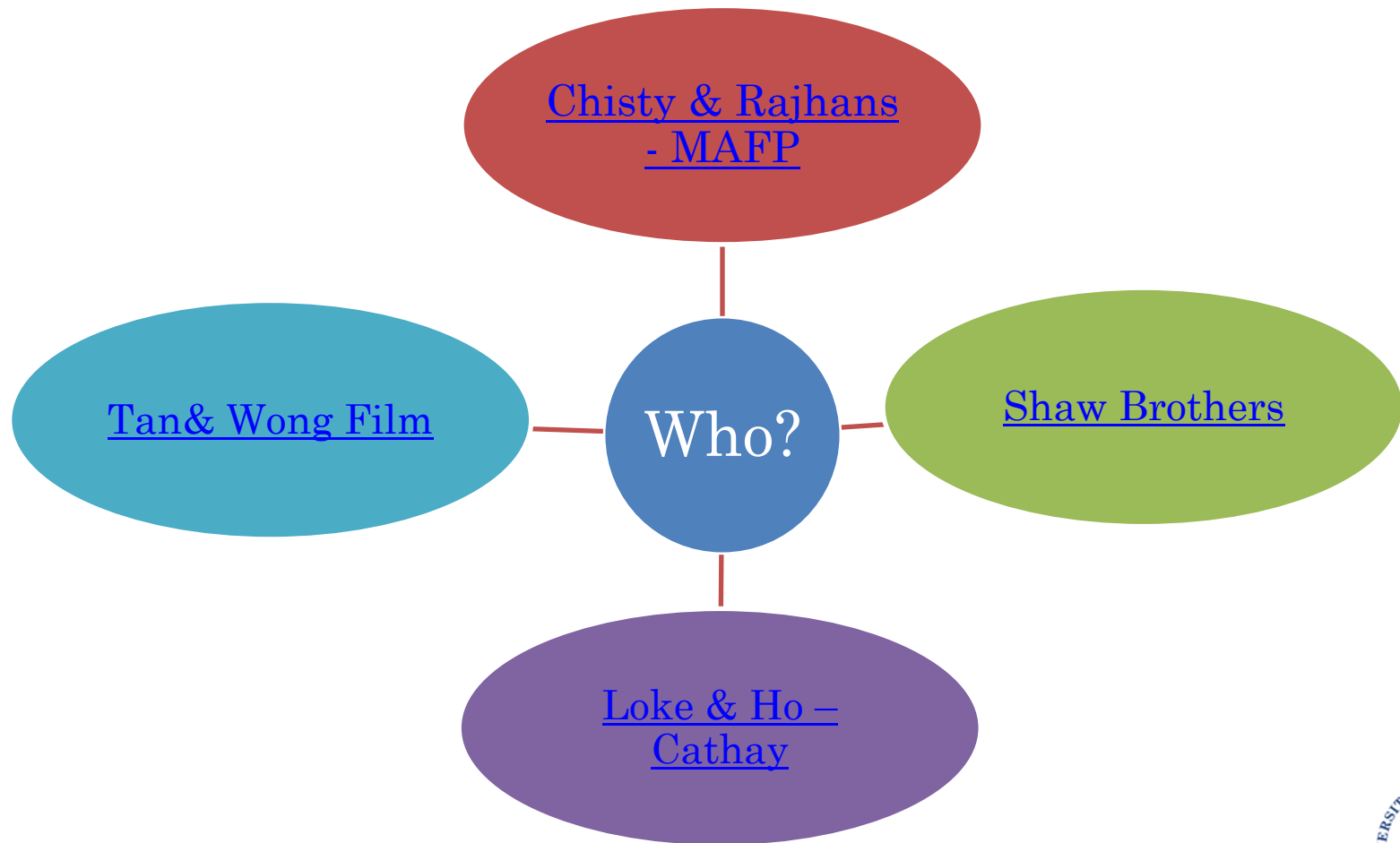
# THE ENTREPRENEURS



Contemporary and Forward Looking

# Who/What Were They?

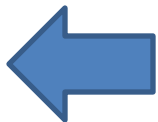
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# Malay Art Film Production (MAFP)

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- The Chisty and Rajhans team established a company called ***Malay Art Film Production (MAFP)*** after the making of Laila Majnun.
- However, their efforts did not last long – the company and their filmmaking equipment were ***later sold to Shaw Brothers.***



# Shaw Brothers & the Shanghai Connection

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1924

- The Shaw Organisation was founded in Shanghai.
- Sought for ***expansion opportunity (to distribute films) in S.E. Asia*** – Singapore.
- Brought in silent films from China but ***boycotted by the alliance of cinemas*** in Singapore.

# Shaw Brothers & the Shanghai Connection

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1927

- Began operating their **1<sup>st</sup> “proper” cinema** in Tanjong Pagar, S’pore.
- **Runme** travelled **to Ipoh and Penang** in order to seek the opportunity to build cinemas while Run Run in charged of the business in S’pore.
- In order to **“test” the market**, they used...
  - Makeshift (**tent**) cinema
  - Retrofitted **Bangsawan theatres** – joint venture with its owners
  - **Mobile** cinema – bicycle & van carrying screening equipments
  - **Amusement parks**

1939: Owns 139 cinemas in Singapore, Malaya, Java & Indo-China.



# Monopoly – Big Money!

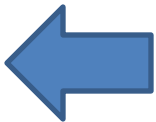
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- After investing heavily in film exhibition, Runme & Run Run – realised the ***need to ensure continuous products*** for their film theatres, meanwhile working towards a ***monopoly system*** by making it difficult for competitors to enter the market.

# Where to Get the Manpower?

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- *In 1937, SB* brought in film equipment & production crew from Shanghai and *set up a film production studio* in Jalan Ampas, Singapore.



# Loke Wan Tho: Cathay

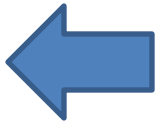
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- Loke Wan Tho, *a wealthy businessman*, entered the big screen entertainment business as a *cinema owner*.

# The Expansionist Project

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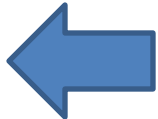
- Dato' Loke worked out expansion plan with ***Dato' Ho Ah Loke***.
- They formed a company called ***Loke Theatres Limited*** and extended their chain of cinemas and bought over those in ***Borneo***.
- By 1957 he already control over ***39 cinema halls*** in Malaya and Singapore.



# Tan and Wong Film Company

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- Tan and Wong Film Company had already established ***a studio in Java as early as 1928*** before they established one in the Singapore. **WHY?**
- It brought ***competition to SB*** with their film “Menantu Derhaka” directed by B.S. Rajhans.



What happened to Film Industry in Malaya?

# THE JAPANESE INVASION



Contemporary and Forward Looking

# Shaw Brothers and Japanese Invasion

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- “Topeng Shaitan” (The Devil’s Mask) marked the temporary closure of the Shaw studio in Ampas Road, Singapore.
- The Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941 *shut down local film production for six years.*
- All cinemas belonged to SB were seized and used to *screen Japanese propagandist films* monitored by the Nippon Eigasha in their efforts of *“Nipponisation”*.

WHY?



# The Japanese Occupation (1941 – 45)

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- The Shaw studio in Singapore was taken over by the Japanese who then formed an organisation ***under its government propaganda machinery.***



# Propaganda Feature Films

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- The organisation brought actors and technicians from Japan and together with local supporting actors and the British prisoners of war and managed to churn out two propaganda films – ***“March to Singapore”*** and ***“Marai No Tora”***.

# Resources:

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## **Books:**

- Hassan, A. M. (2013). *Malaysian cinema in a bottle: A century (and a bit more) of wayang*. Selangor: Orange Dove.
- Hatta, A. K. (1997). *The Malay Cinema*. Selangor: Penerbit UKM.
- Mohd Zamberi, A. M. and Aimi, J. (2005). *Malaysian Films: The Beginning*. Selangor: FINAS.
- Van der Heide, William (2002). *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

## **Websites:**

- 1) [http://www.shaw.sg/sw\\_abouthistory.aspx?id=2%20132%20219%2037%20209%20178%20249%2068%20124%20188%20172%20153%20233%20110%20175%20165](http://www.shaw.sg/sw_abouthistory.aspx?id=2%20132%20219%2037%20209%20178%20249%2068%20124%20188%20172%20153%20233%20110%20175%20165) as browsed on February 8, 2012.
- 2) [http://www.cathayholdings.com.my/about/corporate\\_history.html](http://www.cathayholdings.com.my/about/corporate_history.html) as browsed on February 8, 2012.
- 3) <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/07/world/asia/run-run-shaw-dies/> as browsed on March 13, 2013.

