

Putting Policemen as Censors in Cinemas: The History of Film Censors in Malaysia

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Abstract

The year was 1917, in a crowded cinema in Penang, Malaysia. A policeman stood silently in the aisle, scrutinizing the movie on screen while glancing at the raucous audience. He is the Censor, the person authorized on behalf of the Commissioner of Police, to approve or otherwise, the exhibition of cinematographic films to the public. This paper traces the historical development of film censors in Malaysia, from the time film first arrived in Malaya in 1898, the legislation that controlled and censored the content of films which then leads to the appointment of policemen as Censors, and the development of the system which sets the foundation of film censorship for more than a century, until today, in Malaysia. Historically, the current system and policies of film censorship in Malaysia was a legacy by the British since late 18th century.

Keywords: film censors, censorship, cinematographic films, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Censorship, in any form, is viewed negatively although film censorship is still currently practiced in many countries around the world, including developed countries such as Sweden (Rosengren, 1997). Britain is said to have the most draconian censorship system in the Western world (Williams, 1998). According to Robertson (1989), film censorship in Britain upholds the parliamentary sovereignty, a political tradition under the leadership of a handful educated elite of vested interest who think they know more about what is best for the less educated masses. Robertson (1989) further argued that this form of control to some extent is a tool of social control, and not consistent with the practice of true democracy that is propagated by the British government. As a colonial state, the British transferred their ideologies to their colonies (Golding, 1977). Thus, the system and censorship policy are an adoption of a system that was determined by the colonial states, one of which is Malaysia.

The arrival of English colonists brought along the English theater as a form of entertainment for the officers. All theatrical performances were held in a special building erected specifically for general screening, although some were held in private homes and clubs. Local government authorities created special rules to control the theatres, especially for safety reasons such as fire hazard. The British colonials who ruled Malaya had 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). In fact, Van Der Heide (2002) strongly believes that the main legacy left by the British to the Malay States was not the practice of film making, rather the control of its production, *vis-a-vis* the film censorship system.

The policies for film control, including censorship, were developed from the regulations of theatre and *bangsawan* public performances. According to Wan Abdul Kadir (1988), the development of art and cultural performances in Malaya has existed for centuries. Cultural performances in the palace began to cultivate among and influence the people, which eventually became popular culture. In Malaya and Singapore, theater performances and public entertainment once popular among the locals were shadow puppets, *mak yong* and *menora* in Kelantan, Chinese or *Mendu* movies in Singapore, Persian movies and other *bangsawan* in Penang, as well as the *ronggeng* dance. (Wan Abdul Kadir, 1988).

Thus, film was used as a medium of communication by the British colonials to disseminate and propagate information to the people. However, film was not a Malay culture. Instead, films were considered an imported

culture since it primarily came from Hollywood, the United States, after the First World War. Film, or moving pictures, first came to Malaya and Singapore as early as 1898 (Lent, 1978, Jamil Sulong, 1990). One of the earliest films shown in the Colony was a documentary on Queen Victoria's Silver Jubilee in London on 20th June 1897.

Only in 1895 did the Theatre Ordinance 1895 was enacted in the Strait Settlements, specifically to regulate the performance of theater, for example in terms of content, the actor's moral, show time, including other safety factors in the theater building. However, when the ordinance was first formulated, the authorities were not aware of the rapid changes and development in film technology that were to change the cinematography industry forever.

Wan Abdul Kadir (1988) also reported that Western culture shown in a Western film was contradictory to the tradition of the Malay community. The spread of the "negative effects" of Western culture through film elements were more evident to local audiences because they thought highly of the civilized West. Elements of Western culture particularly fashion, music, dance, behavior, etc., would immediately be followed by local youths (Wan Abdul Kadir, 1988). For example, in 1931, a local newspaper warned about the influence of movies on society, and advised parents to preview Western films before allowing their daughters to watch them, precisely because there were intimate scenes between men and women. (Wan Abdul Kadir, 1988 :148).

Using historical methodology namely archival and document analysis, the aim of this article is to trace the historical development of film censors in Malaysia, the legislation that controlled and censored the content of films which then leads to the appointment of policemen as Censors, and the development of the system which sets the foundation of film censorship for more than a century in Malaysia.

2. Police as Censors

The task of censoring films fell under the jurisdiction and responsibility of the Police Department (Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud, 2008). The Police were deemed as the society's moral guardian, and that they were expected to act upon the showing of any uncensored films which could cause unnecessary public disorder. In 1908, a new ruling stated that all theatres could be inspected by a Police Sergeant, and that the definition of theatre includes movie theaters and *ronggeng* stages. The Police Sergeant was given the authority on behalf of the Police Commissioner to enter any premises of public performance and to impose censorship upon any film even stopping it during the live screening of the film.

The censorship of film content was only brought into effect in 1912. Film distributors were required to submit a set of description of scenes from their films to the Police Department prior to the screening of films. However, as the number of imported films increased dramatically after World War I, particularly from Hollywood, the amount of work for the policemen had also increased dramatically. Hence, the need arose for a dedicated person as an Official Censor working on a full time basis in the Police Department. The main duties of the Censor was "*to examine all cinematograph films previous to exhibition in the Colony, Federated Malay States and Johore, and collect the fees for so doing, and to prohibit those considered unsuitable for exhibition*" (CO 273/468/22706).

The appointment of an Official Censor came under the following provisions of the Theatres Ordinance 1908 Amendment 1917:

"(2) No person shall advertise, present, or carry on any cinematograph display of a public nature unless the film has been signed by an officer to be appointed by the Governor under the style of the Official Censor of Cinematographs, and has been passed by him for exhibition in the Colony.

(3) Any person who shall advertise, or present, or cause to be advertised or presented any scene in a cinematographic display of a public nature in the Colony which has been passed for exhibition by the Official Censor of Cinematograph shall for such offense be liable on conviction before a police court to a fine of not exceeding five hundred dollars." (Straits Settlements 1917a)

The jurisdiction of the Ordinance included the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Malacca and Penang), the Federated Malay States (Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan) and the Unfederated Malay States (Johore only). The other Unfederated Malay States (Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Perlis) and Sabah and Sarawak were only placed under the jurisdiction of the Ordinance after 1927.

3. The Appointment of a Film Censor

The appointment of a Censor to carry out film censorship to examine, censor and approve film permits began in 1918 after the Theatres Ordinance 1908 Amendment 1917 was approved. The first Film Censor appointed on a temporary basis was F. Neville Pigott (Straits Settlements, 1917b). The second Film Censor, who was also

appointed temporarily was T.R. Davidson (Straits Settlements, 1917c) and the third was J. Duncan Roberts (Straits Settlements, 1918).

The appointment for the second Film Censor, T.R. Davidson, was proposed by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Arthur Young, in a letter to the London Colonial Office dated 21 November 1921, in accordance with the provision of clause 3 (2) of Theatres Ordinance 1908 Amendment 1917 (CO 273/458/2334). Incidentally, T.R. Davidson was a British citizen who was unemployed at the time because the company where he worked, Singapore Oil Mills, had already been sold. He was promised a salary of £400 a year with an annual office expense allowance of £100.

The application for a permanent Film Censor was submitted for approval by the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Arthur Young, to Sir Walter Long of the Colonial Office, London, in a letter dated March 9, 1918 (CO 273/468/22706). The requisites to become a film censor, were that, one had to be educated and broad-minded, had good common sense, and knowledgeable on the cultures and world views of Asia, as well as some knowledge about film making. The salary offered was £400 a year with an annual office expense allowance of £100 (at the conversion rate of Malaya \$1 = 2 Shilling 4 pence). The annual salary increment was £50 to £25 for the second and third year. The maximum salary was £475 per year while the return trip from London to Singapore was borne by the government. The office was not pensionable but contracted for 3 years, without bonus except for a transport allowance of £35 a year (CO 273/468/22706).

During the 1920 - 1942 period, the officer in charge of Film Censors was Sergeant TM Hussey, assisted by W.H. Lamb. As the number of films to be censored increased tremendously, G.T. Peall was appointed as the Assistant of Film Censors (Straits Settlements, 1926). Based on the Annual Report of the Police Force of the Straits Settlements, it stated that in 1924, a total of 1,001 films, or equivalent to 3,257,800 feet of film, or about 83 films per month were censored (Straits Settlements, 1925).

Table 1 lists all the Film Censors appointed under the Police Department from 1917 to 1942 for Singapore and Malaya.

Table 1. List of film censors 1917 - 1942

No.	Name	Position
1	F. Neville Pigott	Temporary Film Censor
2	TR Davidson	Temporary Film Censor
3	J. Duncan Roberts	Temporary Film Censor
4	T.M. Hussey	Official Film Censor
5	W.H. Lamb	Substituted Hussey who were on leave until 15 Mac 1925
6	G.T. Peall	Assistant Film Censor.
7	P.F. Howitt	Assistant Film Censor replacing Peall.
8	A.F. Hunter	Assistant Film Censor as of 1 May 1930
9	E. Strickland	Assistant Film Censor
10	W.W. Dean	Assistant Film Censor
11	E.A. Brown	Assistant Film Censor
12	W.W. Dean	Deputy Film Censor as of 11 Mac 1938
13	P.H. Andrews	Official Film Censor for the Unfederated Malay States

4. T. M. Hussey, the Man with the Scissors

The appointment of a permanent official Film Censor was first made by the Governor of the Straits Settlements on February 3, 1920. The first official Film Censor was Sergeant Thomas MacDonald Hussey. He was recommended by Lord Milner to the Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Arthur Young, in a letter dated October 22, 1919. Sergeant Hussey was born in July 1888 at Barton Regis, Gloucestershire and raised in Bristol, England. He has 4 years of working experience in a film-making company before joining the British Army. He joined the army in 1915 and served in Lille, France during the First World War. Based on his experience in the

film industry and as a former soldier, he began his work at the Singapore Police Headquarters to be the first Official Censor.

At the time of his appointment in 1920, T.M. Hussey was 31 years old, and recently married to Lady Colina Elwy Campbell in December 1919. They came to Singapore and returned to England several times for holiday. However, they later got divorced in 1938 but with no children.

Braddell (1982: 118) describes the task of the Film Censor in Singapore:

“We will start at a very imposing building which Government has constructed at the corner of Maxwell Road. In a room at the top of it we shall find one of the world’s martyrs, Captain T.M. Hussey, Official Film Censor. During 1932, this unfortunate gentleman had to sit through no less than 4,577,700 feet of films, and not only had to censor all of this but also every piece of advertising matter which accompanied it – trailers, posters, stills, and so forth.”

Nevertheless, a Film Censor may have been quite familiar with the Colony’s environment, culture, sensitivities and needs of the local community to be able to work for an extended period of time. As a Film Censor, Capt. TM Hussey relied on general guidelines that are mostly related to aspects of sociocultural, as reported in Braddell (1982: 118):

“All films are objectionable which depict murders, robberies, the modus operandi of thieves, counterfeiters, or other criminals, violent assaults on females, or which will obviously tend to produce racial ill-feeling, set class against class, outrage the religious susceptibilities of any section of the community, bring the laws or the administration of justice into contempt or ridicule, encourage immorality, pander to salacious instincts or give rise to a feeling of unrest or insecurity.”

TM Hussey was promoted to the rank of Captain due to his commitment and dedication as a Film Censor. Some accused the Film Censor in Singapore as “anti-British” and “autocratic”. Britain was still far behind in making films that can attract people to the cinema, and it was unfortunate that many of their films were also banned. A strict censorship system practiced in Malaya and Singapore rankled the players in the British film industry.

Captain Hussey was required to retire on March 11, 1938, at the age of 50 years. However, he appealed to withdraw from his retirement about a month before the termination of his service. One assumption for his withdrawal of retirement was his divorce case in England. Singapore’s *The Strait Times* on 23 June 1937 reported that Hussey’s wife, Lady Colina Hussey, was granted a *Decree Nisi* from a court in Exeter, London, for reasons that Hussey was a cheating husband back in Singapore. Hussey’s appeal to extend his services was approved by the Governor and Hussey served as a Censor again for many years. He only returned to England during World War II and Japan occupied Singapore in 1943 and died in December 1965 in Worthing, Sussex, England at the age of 77 years old.

Although the position of Film Censor was originally for three years, but Captain Hussey served for over 22 years. His illustrious and extended career as well as his personal philosophies and principles had shaped and set the foundation for the film censorship’s system and policies in Malaysia and Singapore. Braddell (1982) even said he was “one of the world’s Martyrs”. As such, it would be more appropriate to call him the “Father of Film Censorship” for Malaysia and Singapore.

5. The Japanese Occupation

During the World War II in 1942 - 1945, Malaya was under the Japanese Occupation. Information on Film Censors was less accessible during this time until the moment the British returned to Malaya, because a lot of information was destroyed before and during the war. However, some information obtained during this period was found at the Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, London.

The Japanese government had long recognized the benefits of using the film to extend their influence and power over the people of Malaya, known as “Nipponisation”. The screening of all films was placed under the control of a Kaisha, or a Japanese occupation government official. However, Malaysians were said to prefer watching films from Britain or America compared to Japan. Therefore, the Japanese government banned all foreign films, except for Japan (Van der Heide 2002). However, since only Japanese films were allowed in cinemas, not many people came and watch the Japanese films. Therefore, the Japanese government decided to allow films from India, especially Hindustan films, to be screened because they were regarded as harmless entertainment films. However, Chinese films were still banned due to the war between Japan and China at that time (Van der Heide 2002).

Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud (2008) found that during this period, the films may be divided into two categories:

1) *Bunka Eiga Gekijio*, a government propaganda body which only showed news and educational films. This category of films was designed to emphasize the spirit of the Japanese, the nature of patriotism of the Japanese, the Japanese Army excellence, the prominence of Japan's light and heavy industry, the diversity of Japanese resources, the reputation of Japanese management skills, the speed of reconstruction of the captured territory and the consensus of a nation of people in Asia that was free from colonialism.

2) Japanese popular films, feature films that were made to familiarize Malaysians with Japanese culture. For example, films showing the superiority of Japanese family life, the harmony in the social system of Japan, the modernity of Japanese civilization without sacrificing the traditional high quality Japanese culture, art and music, the respect for the elders, and their loyalty to the country and to their Emperor.

To propagate the policy of "Nipponisation", one effective method was to control the film industry (Chin Kee Onn, 1946). One of the first steps made by the Japanese government was taking over all cinemas across the country. This monopoly was given to *Eiga Haikyu Sha* (a Film Distribution Company), which not only dictated the theatre management but also determined the approval for any silent movies or poor grade soundtrack films screened at fun parks. By controlling the stage, they could determine the type of film which could be screened and when they should be screened. All films from Hollywood and Britain, war films and certain films from China were banned. According to Chin Kee Onn (1946), many films from Japan were brought in for screening, including newsreels and educational films. These types of films were more of a Japanese propaganda to highlight the indomitable spirit and patriotism of its people, in addition to showcase the Japanese military prowess and the capability of the Japanese heavy industries.

The method of censorship system adopted during the Japanese occupation was quick and very effective, as people did not dare to object to any decision made by the Japanese military government at that time. By selecting the type of film, language and country of origin, the Japanese use their absolute power in matters regarding censorship policy in Malaya. Colonialism or imperialism ideals committed by the Japanese was not merely political, economic and social development in general, but extended even to film censorship. This authoritarian power took place during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya and Singapore between February 1942 to September 1945.

6. Pre-Independence of Malaysia

After Japan lost the war to the Allied Forces, the British returned to Malaya as the British Military Administration. They wanted to counter the Japanese propaganda, and reviewed and tightened the rules regarding film censorship, particularly the influence of communism among the locals. Therefore, the censorship policy was revised and a "Film Censorship Guidelines for Singapore and the Federation of Malaya" was issued on February 3, 1947. In 1948, the Film Censor appointed by the Governor of Straits Settlement was G.C. Allen for the Straits Settlements and Johore, and J. Evans by the High Commissioner for the Federated Malay States.

The general guidance for censorship was to censor anything that "should offend the susceptibilities of the normal cinema-goer or encourage or instruct anti-social activity" (CO 875/51/4). According to Enright (1965), in the early days, the philosophy and concept of censorship as practiced by members of the Film Censorship Board was to assess the overall effect of the film on the people "of the least sophisticated". Five main areas of concern were:

- 1) Racial aspect, that might offend the people, either directly or indirectly.
- 2) Religion, especially which might cause a clash between the community and the religion of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism.
- 3) Sexual scenes, especially the display of a female body.
- 4) Superstitions and myths, for example, the obsession with superstition and magic amulet that could make a person invincible or impenetrable to weapons.
- 5) Violence, such as films that demonstrated new methods of killing people or robbing a bank.

These policies managed to retain their basic principles until today in four aspects: security & public order, religion, socioculture, and civility & etiquettes (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010).

7. Board of Film Censors Malaya 1954

Before the Film Censorship Board (LPF) was established officially, the Acting Film Censor was GC Allen, who served until March 31, 1953. Singapore had formed its own Board of Film Censors in 1953 and followed by the Board of Film Censors Malaya a year later. The task of a Film Censor was now given to local officials and no longer to British officers.

The Board of Film Censors of Malaya was officially established on January 8, 1954, and the first Chairman of the Board was Mrs Cynthia Koek. She was assisted by Teo Kiak Seng and KR Pisharody, as Assistant Censor for Chinese films and Tamil-language films respectively, and Hj Omar bin Chik (January 8, 1954 - 30 September 1954) and Hj Lemin bin Alias (beginning October 1, 1954) for Malay films. Their operational office was located in the Customs House, Maxwell Road, Singapore. The building was built by the PWD at a cost of \$313,000 and housed the Office of Film Censors since June 6, 1932 to August 13, 1989. The building is now one of the historic buildings in the city of Singapore. Members of the Board carried out screening films for the entire of the Federation of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak (Cynthia Koek, 1954).

In terms of legislation, the British colonists wanted Malaysia to have similar policies of censorship system as in Britain. However, there were significant differences between the systems in Britain with the system in Malaysia. In Britain, the British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC) was established by the industries to regulate the types and scenes of film to be screened in Britain. Local authorities had more power in terms of the law to allow or not any films to be shown in their respective districts/municipalities. However, in Malaya, it was the British government who decided on the censorship policies to be adhered to by the people of Malaysia until today.

8. Board of Film Censors Malaysia 1966

The Film Censorship Board (LPF) was established in Malaysia on March 3, 1966. This was made after Singapore withdrew from the Federation of Malaysia in August, 1965. Nevertheless, according to Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud (2008) there were slight differences between the film censorship system conducted in Singapore as compared to Malaysia. Despite the similarities in the basic functions of censorship, there were differences in terms of the implementation and system performed. For example, the Board of Film Censors (BFC) of Singapore is placed under the Singapore Ministry of Information and Arts while in Malaysia, the jurisdiction of the LPF is placed under the administration of the Ministry of Home Affairs of Malaysia. The censorship policy implemented by the BFC Singapore is subjected to the Films Act, in which all films must be previewed by Censors, except for government-sponsored films and those films made by local television stations, and films not for distribution or screening in Singapore (Ho, 1991).

Malaysia national television station, *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* (RTM), first came on-air in December, 1963. As a new television station in a new country after achieving Independence, Television Malaysia could not accommodate all the broadcasting needs, thus Malaysia had to import foreign television programs. After the restructuring of the LPF in 1973, the board increased the number of staff from a total of seven people in 1973, consisting of a Chairman, three censors and three Assistant Censors, to a total of 65 people in 2002, including those attached to private television stations. This figure includes a Chairman, a Deputy Chairman and 63 members, comprising of 32 members at the headquarters, three in Sabah branch, two at Sarawak branch, 11 at RTM, 8 at TV3 and 7 people at NTV7. Between 1994 and 2000, four members were stationed at Mega TV, but after it stopped broadcasting in 2000, all four members return to LPF headquarters. By 2012, the LPF has a total of 77 members, comprising a Chairman, a Deputy Chairman and 75 members, and assisted by the Film Censorship and Enforcement Division, Ministry of Home Affairs.

According to Karthigesu (1994), all foreign films broadcasted by Television Malaysia are censored by the LPF, however the censorship of films for television are more stringent than the censorship for cinemas. When the private television TV3 began its operations in 1984, the challenges of censoring broadcasting content increased. Subsequently when the satellite TV station ASTRO began broadcasting in 1998, the LPF is only engaged by ASTRO in terms of seeking guidance on censorship, since the censoring process is done internally by presentation editors of ASTRO. The different policy of censorship on ASTRO as compared to terrestrial television stations in Malaysia is due to the licence and provisions under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998.

9. Conclusions

According to Ernst and Seagle (1969), the perfect film censor does not exist in this world. Each Censor is subject to their own personal knowledge and experience. This individual nature cannot be avoided because whether a film is approved, censored or banned, it all depends on their social-cultural background of the censors. Censors make their decisions based on their personal attitude despite having certain set guidelines to follow.

Nevertheless, the current Government is considering a new policy of self-censorship, whereby the task of censoring will be delegated to the respective television stations, and later, to film distributors or cinema owners. ASTRO's track record for the past 15 years has proven that self-censorship is viable and is acceptable to the people and the Government. In looking forward to the centennial anniversary of the appointment of the first Film Censor in 2018, the future for Film Censors in Malaysia now remains uncertain.

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