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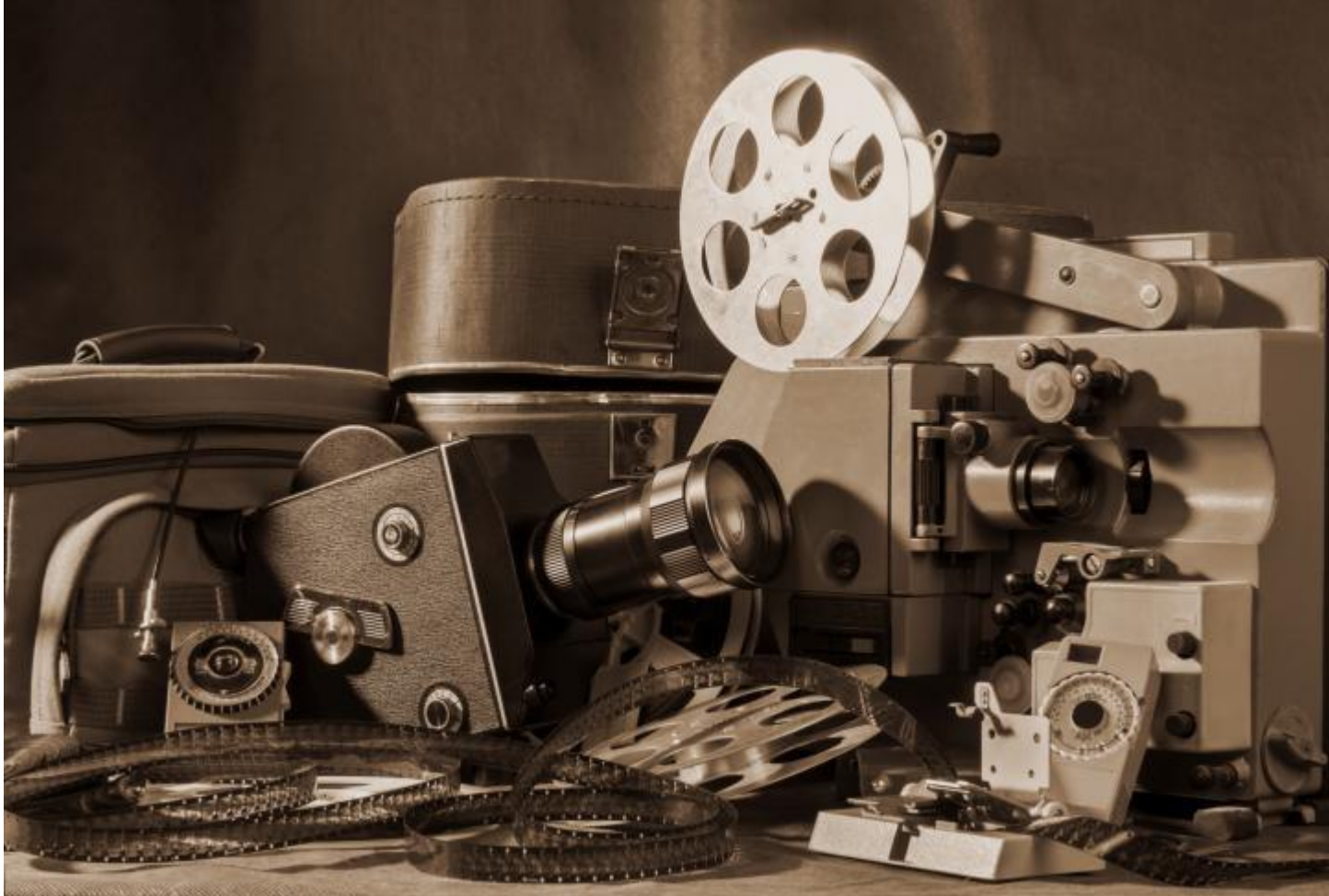
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Movie-making in Singapore

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It's difficult to make a profitable movie on the tiny Singapore market. How do you sell beyond the little red dot?

When the movie *Ah Boys to Men* broke the record for the highest-grossing Singapore film in December last year, its producers knew they would, at the very least, avoid making a loss. The S\$6.03 million collected at the box office up to that point was twice the S\$3 million that was spent to make the movie, so one would think its director, Jack Neo, would be laughing all the way to the bank. One would also be wrong.

“As a general guide, the cinema gets 40 percent of the price of the movie ticket,” explains **Eugene Lee**, Director of Business Development & Operations at mm2 entertainment, which co-produced the *Ah Boys to Men* movies. “Of the remaining 60 percent, you’ll have to take away 7 percent for Goods and Services Tax (GST), and then 15 percent for the distributor. After which you’ll have to account for the A&P (advertising and promotions) costs, which we try to limit to S\$200,000, otherwise we will not be able to recover costs.”

“And then you take away what the investors have invested into making the movie. So, as producer, we would be left with 3 or 4 percent of the box office revenue. Movie-making is a high risk business, with a high chance of losing money.”

Money No Enough?

It helped that the S\$3 million budget produced enough material for a 2-part movie, with *Ah Boys to Men 2* released in March 2013. With a combined box office in Singapore topping S\$16 million, Neo nearly tripled the \$6.02 million that his 1998 comedy, *Money No Enough*, raked in 15 years ago. Even after accounting for “exhibition fees”, which is the cinemas’ 40 percent cut of the box office, there is still plenty to go around.

“On average, it takes about S\$700,000 to S\$800,000 to make a movie in Singapore, and you need to make three times that amount just to recover costs,” Lee says. “In other words, if the production costs are S\$800,000, you need to generate S\$2.4 million to break even. That’s the formula that we usually work with.” Applying that formula to the S\$3 million budget for the *Ah Boys to Men* movies, S\$9 million would be the approximate breakeven figure – that leaves S\$7 million to be split among investors and producers.

However, not every Singapore-made movie hits the jackpot like *Ah Boys to Men* did. For movie director **Chai Yee Wei**, whose latest film *That Girl in Pinafore* was released a week before Singapore’s National Day, the financial numbers around a movie can make for grim reading.

“Let’s say \$60,000 was spent on the marketing of a film. If what you have left after the movie theatres take their cut is, say, \$80,000, then you would be left with \$20,000 after accounting for the marketing. Of that \$20,000, 15 percent becomes the distributor’s fee. Whatever is left, which is 85 percent of the \$20,000, goes to the producer.”

However, that 85 percent of the hypothetical S\$20,000 – which works out to S\$17,000 – does not all belong to the producer. Investors need to be paid according to how much they have stumped out in proportion to the estimated budget. For example, if the estimated budget was S\$100,000, an investor who had put in S\$10,000 would get 10 percent of that S\$17,000 – which works out to be S\$1,700 for a S\$10,000 investment.

Selling beyond Singapore

Because of Singapore’s small market size, it is imperative for Singaporean movie-makers to sell beyond the shores of the island state to generate enough income to recover the outlay. Conventional wisdom within the industry calls for minimising references that are uniquely Singaporean, such as the use of Singlish. As a result, less experienced directors often give in to producers’ demands to play down the “Singaporean-ness” of a movie.

“Back then I listened more to what the producers had to say, and they always said that they know best,” recalls Chai, who reworked the script for his first full-length feature film in 2008 more than twenty times before production company Oak3 gave it the green light. “They were thinking a bit more on the commercial aspect, and I don’t blame them because someone was taking a chance on me, and I’ll do my best to give them what they want. I wouldn’t say the movie was 100 percent the movie that I had wanted to make, but it was my first baby.”

Chai’s latest movie, *That Girl in Pinafore*, is about the 80’s Singaporean Chinese music movement *xinyao* (新谣). To Singaporeans of a certain age, it is a core element of Singaporean culture before the city state morphed into the global cosmopolitan city that it is today. Although there is not a whole lot of Singlish in the movie, the cast of young Singaporean actors deliver lines in Chinese with an unmistakable Singaporean flavour.

Curiously enough, that has worked better than Chai’s previous attempt at “internationalising” a movie.

“After the movie’s premiere at the Shanghai Film Festival in June, our China and Taiwan advisors told us that the response had been overwhelming,” mm2’s Lee, who co-produced the movie with Chai told

Perspectives@SMU. “I’ve always believed that Singapore-made movies can get into that market as long as they strike a chord with the (mainland) Chinese audience.”

Chai himself adopts a more philosophical approach.

“A language isn’t just for communication; it carries with it its history and cultural evolution. The Chinese language in different parts of China is spoken differently, and people from Beijing travelling overseas can identify a fellow Beijing just by speech. If a Singaporean film is done in Beijing Chinese, everyone will reject it.”

“It all goes back to being truthful: if you’re not truthful to the story or the context, you’re setting yourself up for failure.”

Chai Yee Wei and Eugene Lee were speakers in the panel “Dialogue with Singaporean filmmakers/producers”, part of the workshop “Producing Chinese Cinemas in the 21st Century” that was held at SMU on July 1-2, 2013.