

# Interview

## Interview with Adrian Teh—The Director of *PASKAL: The Movie*

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Modernity triggered society's fascination with machines and technologies. As an invention of modernity, cinema and its technology reached Malaya as a result of colonialism and the expansion of capitalism. The arrival of cinematic technology on Malayan shores was not possible without the invention of the pioneers like Edison, Lumiere Brothers, and Melies. The audience were more fascinated with the technology rather than the product produced by the technology—the photos.

The history of filmmaking in Malaysia has a long tradition that has begun in the latter part of the 19th century. However, as a form of entertainment, cinema is a continuation of various storytelling traditions that already existed in a society that begun with oral tradition. It evolved into many forms of stage plays, including *Mak Yong*, *Bangsawan*, and *wayang kulit* to name but a few. Such local cultures and sensibilities formed the basis of narration in the early local cinematic form.

The early studios like the Malay Film Productions and the Cathay-Kris, however, owned and controlled all three important aspects of the filmmaking business—production, distribution, and exhibition. The political economy of early Malaysian cinema indicated that the industry was controlled by a few players, creating an oligopolistic industrial and market structure.

The demise of the studio system in the late 1970s juxtaposed the post-1969 racial riot incident that continues to haunt the nation-building project, and one could not be certain if the deepest wound resulted from that was truly healed even now. But interestingly, that period also signalled the emergence of the independent film culture that continues to evolve and exists until today. It sounds very straightforward, but underneath the surface, the industry is more volatile, and also susceptible to changes in economics and politics.

Riding the wave of economic developments into the 1990s, the Malaysian films, by and large, are also symbolic representations and cultural negotiations of broad multicultural contexts of societal transformation within which the notion of national identities and national cinema are constantly being challenged and renegotiated.

Fast-forward to the new millennium, the film culture in Malaysia has evolved greatly in its formulation of a more inclusive and multicultural cinema, yet, the logic of the market is still occupying the centre stage. The contemporary Malaysian filmmakers who are from various backgrounds contribute to vastly contested representations of a powerful imagination on the identity and consciousness of the Malaysian nation.

Through conversation with Adrian Teh, one of the commercially successful filmmakers in Malaysia, this excerpt is edited and structured to offer a glimpse into the trials and tribulations of filmmaking in contemporary Malaysia. The aim is to provide some insights into the symbiotic relationship between the filmmaking industry in Malaysia and values that have been propagated in society at large via popular cinema. This conversation took place in 2018 when *PASKAL: The Movie* was released in the cinema.

**Question:** First and foremost, welcome back to USM and thank you for agreeing to have this “*sembang santai*” session with us. Let us kick-start by asking how do you start your journey as a filmmaker in Malaysia?

**Answer:** Thanks for having me and it’s my pleasure to be here, again, at the School of Communication, USM, a place where I started my filmmaking career. To answer your question, I would say I’ve always been the kind of person who would not let other people dictate my decision. If I had listened to my mother, for instance, I would not have gotten involved in film industry at all. I probably would have become a lawyer, businessman, or medical doctor. *[laughter]* After my STPM, my mother offered to sponsor me to study at any business, law, or medical schools. I told her I want to make films and I want to be a film director. She was shocked. She asked me, “Make films? Can it make money or not?” I said, “I don’t know, but that is what I want to do.” Then she said, “Ok. You know what, it is your choice, if you want to study whatever you like, find your own way.” Then, I took up PTPTN and came to USM. Hence, my journey started here. It took my mother a long time to be convinced that I am serious about filmmaking. Even during my undergraduate years, she still did not believe in me. When I was undertaking an internship and working on the *Digi Reality Show* in KL for two months, my mother still opined that I had no clue as to what I was doing.

It was after the success of *Ais Kacang Puppy Love*, I invited her to the red carpet. She witnessed the moment and said to me, “Maybe, I am the one who doesn’t know, maybe.” *[laughter]* My mother is now my number one fan. Whenever I posted or shared anything on social media, she would click “like” on every single one of my posts. She would invite her friends, my aunts, and uncles to wear *PASKAL*’s T-shirts, walking around shopping mall areas in Gurney and Queensbay, and waiting for people to take photos with them. That’s how proud she is of me now, my number one fan. *[laughter]*

**Question:** The story of your mother is interesting because it provides us a window to understand how a typical middle-class parent in Malaysia responded to her child’s non-conventional idea of pursuing a career in the entertainment industry. What kind of filmmaker did you identify yourself with?

**Answer:** In my opinion, there are two types of directors, one is a commercial director. That’s what I hope to achieve. The other type is award-winning director. I am definitely not that kind. A lot of people said *PASKAL* should be nominated for the best film in the next FFM-30 (*Festival Filem Malaysia* or Malaysia Film Festival). I said to them if I can exchange that award opportunity for another million box office receipts, I will take that. *[laughter]* But this doesn’t mean I am greedy and I want more money. It is because I feel the responsibility of making sure that my investors got their money back. After all, I invited people to invest, they placed their trust in me, I want to make sure that I could repay their trust and commitment to me. There is nothing wrong with making money. The film industry exists because of the desire to generate income and capital. But, the point is that whether you make money from the government or you make money from the market. In my case, I have been making money from the market, I never make money from the government (through incentive grant provided by FINAS) at all.

**Question:** Directorial job is not your only responsibility. As a CEO of a production company, what are your other responsibilities?

**Answer:** Beside directing, I am also the CEO of the company. Basically, I negotiate the business deal for all my films. On top of that, I am also in charge of the planning and marketing of my films. Of course, I have producers who would help me to execute my marketing plans and campaigns.

**Question:** In your opinion and based on all the hard work you have done, what is the formula, if there is any, to a successful film in Malaysia?

**Answer:** I have been saying it for so many years, if you have a good product, a good movie, good script, good actor with good execution, you are only 30% successful, not even half. Another 30% depends on your marketing strategy, how you manage and package your film in order to sell it to your audience. Another 30% is to compete for the best timing to release the film. The last 10% attributes to luck—something beyond your control.

**Question:** During your sharing session on the making of the *PASKAL: The Movie* (2018), you mentioned on several occasions that you have established a special friendship with Lieutenant Commander Anuar bin Hj Alias who is the real-life character of the movie. This so-called ideal friendship, at the same time, has also been sutured into the notion of patriotism as represented in *PASKAL: The Movie*. Could you please further elaborate these two concepts?

**Answer:** To me, the fundamental to these concepts is that you cannot buy friendship or patriotism with money because these are the principles and values that come from within yourself. *PASKAL* is a story about the Royal Malaysian Navy. Through my working experiences with the navy, I salute their professionalism and discipline. I have great respect for the Malaysian Navy, to me, they are the most professional, effective, and transparent kind of organisation. The story follows the journey of a navy lieutenant who serves the country and safeguards the interests of Malaysia. At the same time, the story also celebrates his friendship with other navy comrades regardless of race and religion. Through their sufferings and sacrifices, I hope the story would instil a sense of patriotism into the audience.

**Question:** What are the markers if there are any, of this patriotism, and as Malaysians, how do we inculcate and nurture patriotism?

**Answer:** For an ordinary citizen like myself, however, there are many forms and ways to show our patriotism. To me, wearing a national jersey and shouting at our national football game is not patriotic behaviour. That is pure entertainment. Patriotism means simple things like paying taxes on time, doing good deeds, giving good education to our children, and teaching them about cultural diversity in Malaysia. We can teach our children to understand various cultures in Malaysia which, I think, had not been emphasized by my parents' generation. In my upbringing, my parents focused more on raising me as a more useful person, but they did not teach me much about other races and religions. To me, I will definitely make it up to my children. That is a form of patriotism, I will try to make my children better understand the country that we live in and the beauty of its multiculturalism.

**Question:** Speaking of multicultural context in the Malaysian film industry, you started as a Chinese-language filmmaker, what is the biggest challenge for you in making a Malay film like *PASKAL*?

**Answer:** Honestly speaking, I didn't feel any problems shifting from making Chinese-language films to a Malay language film. The dialogues in the film consist of a few languages, which include Somali, Angolan, Chinese, and the rest are mostly in Malay and English. It was not my intention to craft a kind of "muhibbah" movie. These are all fictional characters based on the need of the narrative. I wrote the script with my scriptwriter. We have the understanding that we will not try to force anything. The choices of language came naturally. If we thought that this part should be in Malay, it is in Malay. If this part should be in English, it is in English. We never try to balance the language percentage.

**Question:** How easy or difficult it was to get financial backers and how long did it take you to finally get the production of this film going?

**Answer:** From the perspective of producer and investor, I did receive a lot of scepticism regarding the feasibility of *PASKAL*. A comment like "nobody would want to watch a Malay film directed by a Chinese director" was the most common one that I got. It took me nearly ten years to finally get this film made. ASTRO played a big role in creating the box office success of *PASKAL* by aggressively promoting the film through its channels. A lot of people didn't know that it wasn't easy for me to get ASTRO to come on board. Over the years, I was rejected three times by ASTRO. I moved on and tried to find other ways to finance the film.

**Question:** We know that finance is a thorny thing in the film industry. Who are your major investors and how do you get them on board?

**Answer:** For *PASKAL*, the first investor to come on board was the Golden Screen Cinema. After I presented the idea without showing them the synopsis, they already agreed to invest in it. The second investor was the TGV. Lastly, it was ASTRO Shaw. Of course, I am also one of the investors, then the subsidiary of Khazanah called GB who wanted to invest in a Malaysian movie. So, they came in halfway through my shoot.

After I finished shooting, I ran out of money to complete the whole production. One of my investors arranged a viewing session for Mr. Henry Tan, the CEO of ASTRO, as well as the head of Chinese and Malay divisions at that time. The three big shots from ASTRO came to my office, in my small room watching the rough cut of *PASKAL* on a small TV screen. After watching it, Henry decided to take on this project without hesitation. Immediately, he instructed the two divisional heads that *PASKAL* would be spearheading ASTRO's Merdeka campaign in that year.

**Comment:** *PASKAL* has generated over 30 million ringgit since it was released in 2018. It is a commercial success and this you owed to your audience whom we believe were from the multiethnic background.

**Response:** In terms of the audience demographic, I think *PASKAL* breaks through the ethnic barrier. It is my first Malay language film, my first Malay directorial debut if you like. When *PASKAL* was first released in Malaysia cinema, there were mainly Malay and Indian audiences who would turn up at the cinema. Even when I asked some of my close Chinese friends to go and watch the film, they replied, "Malay film? Not easy lah!" or "OKlah, I'll find time." These kinds of responses showed how segregated Malaysian filmgoers are. However, the audiences' demographics started to change after one month of screening as the marketing strategy launched by the ASTRO (Chinese channels) managed to reach the prospective (Chinese) audience. After that, we observed more and more Chinese audiences talked about the film and viewed it with open minds. I am very grateful to ASTRO because they believed in the project.

**Question:** Given your experience in bringing Malaysian films to the international film market, do you think the uniqueness of Malaysian cinema would have a lot of advantages?

**Answer:** I am very close with Fox international channel. The regional director came to Penang for holiday twice and I took her around. We are very close and basically, she bought 80% of my films. I remember there are two films I didn't sell to her because the other platforms offered a better price, and she still hates me for that. [laughter]

Over the past decades, I always have had a good rapport with Celestial, Star, and Fox. I have been dealing with them for many of my productions. Usually, before I started shooting, I would sell the rights to the paid TV. That is my usual way of securing revenue before the production. Quite often, I closed the deal with phone calls. I didn't need to fly for hire purchase. But for *PASKAL* I couldn't do that. This time I got stuck.

**Question:** What happened then, apart from difficulties to get funding for *PASKAL*?

**Answer:** I took a day off halfway shooting *PASKAL* in Sabah because I was running out of money to finish the production. I made a day trip to Hong Kong to meet the Asia Regional Head of Fox I mentioned just now. I presented to her and the whole purchasing team with some *PASKAL*'s footages and my proposal. Eventually, they still didn't buy it. It is understandable because Fox's distribution network is mainly circulating English and Chinese films. There is no Malay channel on their platform. Despite our good relationship, business is business. She was not convinced that the Malay language is something they should buy. So, that was it.

**Question:** Who provided the lifeline?

**Answer:** Then came Netflix. Netflix wanted to buy some of my films including *PASKAL*. Netflix made a very good offer for *PASKAL*, and it was too good for me to turn it down. But, the condition was that other than Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, China, and Turkey, the film cannot be screened anywhere else. So, it was a gamble for me to accept this deal at that particular point in time because we didn't know what was going to happen. Anyway, we took it and signed the contract with Netflix. It turns out to be a good source of revenue. As a producer and director, I believe one must explore various streams of revenue. In my observation, however, most of the local producers do not pay enough attention in this area. I think most of them put too much emphasis on the local market in terms of the box office collection.

**Question:** Last but not least, do you have any suggestions as to how to reform the Malaysian film industry?

**Answer:** I would stress two aspects. Firstly, and nationally, the financial incentive mechanism provided by the Malaysian government to the film industry needs to be reformed. Instead of subsidising the local film production through a one-off grant, I suggest we replace the grant system with creative subsidising mechanisms like reforming entertainment tax reduction. The current granting system has a lot of loopholes that resulted

in mismanagement and corruption. Secondly, and internationally, the government should work harder to secure bilateral film co-production agreements or arrangements with other countries. As a small country like Malaysia, it will bring more benefit than harm to our industry if the government manages to negotiate as many international co-production treaties as possible, then we can really bring Malaysian films to other parts of the world. Under the co-pro treaties, we will have a safe passage into the international markets. It would literally be the best framework for Malaysian filmmakers who intend to bring our films to the international market. For instance, China has signed a co-pro treaty with a few countries but not with Malaysia. If you don't have this co-pro treaty, Malaysian films will need to compete with all other foreign films including Hollywood. As far as I am concerned, Malaysia has been talking to the Australian government for the past five years to come out with a treaty, until now we haven't heard any solid development.

**Interviewers:** Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us. We really appreciate your open and honest perspectives on so many issues concerning Malaysian cinema.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Cinema, as a form of popular culture as well as system of signification, has been functioning to facilitate the project of social imagination and nation-building. Film enables people to locate a sense of belongingness in the context of nationalism, and it institutionalises the experiences and emotions of many people. However, this cultural institution does not stand on its own. It is part of a bigger capitalist industrial structure that conditions what and how films would be produced by different interest groups in different time. After more than a century of existence, capital intensive and the need to generate and regenerate wealth is still the driving force of the film industry. It is a business venture, a very expensive one to run for that matter. The one that can make or break production companies, as well as a nation's future.