



Audiences at screening of AFA's 10th anniversary commissioned film, 2015

Photo courtesy of the Asian Film Archive

AFA – young, ambitious and fighting for film and funding in a tough market

The Asian Film Archive (AFA) was founded in 2005 on the idealism and tenacity of a young freshly graduated engineer, whose vision was to set up a Pan-Asian repository of Asian films – many of which had yet to be archived in their own countries. While there was interest and expressed support, there was undoubtedly as much curiosity as to how this not-for-profit archival organisation could ever survive. This article takes a look at an 11-year journey that has been challenging and exhilarating by turns, but always rewarding.

To get the fledgling AFA organised and functioning, a staggering amount of canvassing went on behind the scenes to get the support of appropriate key industry partners like the National Archives of Singapore, the Media Development Authority, the Film Commission and the National Library Board. With the endorsement of these agencies, cold-calling on donors by AFA's then two-man team and a dedicated group of volunteers was made smoother.

Simultaneously, AFA pro-actively identified and proposed project-based work to private and public organisations so as to raise short-term operational funding while establishing a distinctive brand of programming. Projects undertaken included the publishing of *Singapore Shorts Vol. 1*, a DVD anthology of independently-made Singapore films from AFA's collection; working with the Ministry of Education to develop film literacy classes and educator workshops on the use of Asian films in the school curriculum and collaborating with screening venues to organise innovative film programmes. These projects helped to

raise the initial awareness to AFA's existence and work.

Within the first year of AFA's Reel Emergency Project's open call, over 400 Asian film titles were deposited for preservation. A growing collection necessitated a growing budget. AFA had to establish regional and international credibility in order to request for funds or when attempting to collaborate with partners. Thus, AFA ensured that it might satisfy the conditions to apply as a full institutional member of the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) and later became the first Singapore-based affiliate of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF).

Locally in Singapore, AFA won the New Non-profit Initiative Award at the National Volunteerism and Philanthropy Awards for its efforts to actively engage with volunteers and the community. Subsequently, AFA was able to obtain charity and Institution of Public Character (IPC) status thus providing tax deductibles to cash donors and so gave potential supporters an impetus to donate.

Singapore Airlines exposure

AFA's survival depended on stakeholders understanding the impact of AFA's preservation work through a sustainable slate of accessible and meaningful programmes. Curated programmes thus needed to have maximum coverage and connection with audiences. A good example of this was AFA's 10th anniversary in 2015, which serendipitously coincided with Singapore's Golden Jubilee celebrations.

AFA capitalised on the occasion to expand its presence by restoring and presenting four significant film titles and even managed to get its films featured on Singapore Airline's inflight entertainment, *KrisWorld*, reaching thousands of audiences in the sky. Riding on the wave of its anniversary celebrations, AFA obtained funding to commission a Southeast Asian anthology of short films featuring prominent Asian filmmakers like Lav Diaz, Lucky Kuswandi, and Tan Chui Mui.

To make its advocacy for preservation and funding support stand out, it was imperative for AFA to devise innovative ways to raise greater awareness about its work. In 2010, AFA collaborated with final-year Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information students on a *Save Our Film* campaign. The campaign aimed to increase awareness among 15-35 year olds on the importance of keeping their cinematic heritage alive. Activities included nationwide guerrilla-style publicity efforts such as mock DVDs and posters at supporting stores and cinemas, video projections on walls and ceilings of public spaces, and a roving showcase featuring recordings from local film community personalities.

In 2016, AFA organised *State of Motion*, curated bus tours to film locations featured in selected films within AFA's collection. The project was proposed as part of Art Week 2016, with AFA commissioning art works created in response to both the locations and the films. The cross disciplinary collaborations gave opportunities for both film and visual art communities to interact. At an international level, AFA managed to successfully get a collection of films inscribed into the UNESCO Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Register, thus helping to raise the profile of AFA's preservation efforts.

Advocating for film preservation remains an uphill task, especially with numerous worthy public causes competing for funds. Raising AFA's profile locally, regionally and internationally through the



Photo courtesy of the Asian Film Archive

AFA's tour of a film location during State of Motion, 2016.

imaginative use of programmes has created fundraising avenues to enable AFA to keep its wheels turning for hopefully, many more years to come.

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On the road for the Save Our Film campaign, 2010.