Film festival director talks to WSWS about censorship in Singapore

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Singapore, which is one of Asia's most modern cities, has a promising arts scene with several theatres, film production facilities, and a number of contemporary galleries and art museums. The island republic has one of the highest computer-to-household ratios (45 to 100) in the world and Internet use is extensive—the highest in Asia. According to some predictions, every household, school and library will have high-speed broadband access to the Internet by the end of this year.

These developments are sharply at odds with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government and its stifling restrictions on democratic rights and civil liberties. The Undesirable Publications Act and the Films Act, allows the government to ban, seize, or censor any written, visual, or musical materials it perceives threaten the stability of the State, are pro-communist, promote drug use or contravene public morals. Naturally, films selected for the annual international festival come up against the country's strict censorship laws.

This year was no exception. Two weeks after Singapore government officials pledged greater artistic freedom, censors banned *Lies*, a new film by Korean director Chang Sun-woo about a high school girl's affair with a middle-aged sculptor, and insisted on three cuts to *In the Realm of the Senses*, Oshima Nagisa's 1976 classic film about a sadomasochistic relationship between a young female innkeeper and her employer. Film festival organisers decided to withdraw Nagisa's classic from the festival, after the Films Appeal Committee rejected their submission that it be shown uncut.

Philip Cheah, director of the Singapore International Film Festival and a leading member of the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC), explained to the *WSWS* why festival organisers decided to withdraw the film.

"*In the Realm of the Senses* is a 24-year-old classic. It is discussed all the time in film literature and to show this film cut at a festival would be a travesty and not fair to history. We withdrew the film in order to preserve the integrity of the film and the festival."

Cheah briefly outlined Singapore's film classification system and the problems it created for organisers.

"Since 1991 the censors have introduced a rating system. There is PG (Parental Guidance) films and R(A), the category of significance. When the R(A) rating system was introduced it allowed those aged 18 years and above to watch more adult type films. But then there was a huge public furore that year and so the government revised the rating and lifted it from 18 to 21 years old.

"The rating system is important for us at the festival because prior to 1991 lots of films were cut and we had a very tough time. The filmmakers were naturally very upset and the distributors were reluctant to show their films in Singapore.

"My most memorable experience was with Kira Muratova, the Russian director. She came to Singapore before 1991 and cuts were demanded in her film the *Asthenic Syndrome*. Muratova was very angry and explained that she had fought censorship all her life in Russia and shouldn't have to come to a foreign country and allow her film to be censored. So I told her that I agreed and we withdrew her film that year.

"In theory the introduction of the rating system allows us to show films uncut at the festival. Of course this is not always the case. In general it has been better for us with the introduction of the rating system but I really feel that when you have the R(A) rating, even in the public cinemas, films shouldn't be cut. Audiences in this rating are 21 and over, they are adults and therefore

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should be able to take responsibility for what they see.

"Today if for some reason the censors want to cut a festival film we, as a rule, refuse and withdraw the film. But the next stage for us, I think, is to have the Film Festival exempted completely from censorship. This is what we need to work towards."

I asked Cheah how the censorship code impacted on artists and filmmakers in Singapore and the overall cultural atmosphere.

"You have a situation," he replied, "where art has not caught up with life. Usually art reflects life but if so much censorship is taking place, then art doesn't reflect life anymore. Life is happening but art lags behind. This kind of control impedes artistic and cultural development."

Cheah pointed to the contradiction between government censorship and the artistic freedom and open information provided by the Internet: "At this point the Internet is a liberating force in that it is still not controllable. Although there are signs that it may be brought under control and you see all these big mergers and joint ventures and so on. If those guys have control of this market then the differentiation that now exists will be lost.

"It is apparent to me today that a lot of the media is not representing or presenting the sharp critical and cultural edge that it should and most of the best of journalism today is on the fringe of the official media. I've noticed that all the best rock critics have started their own e-zines and this is the way it is going. In the media it is all happening on the fringe and this is why the Internet is so interesting to me. You can be on the fringe on the Net but your level of access is much better than if you are in printed form."

Returning to the difficulties facing filmmakers and cinema audiences in Singapore, Cheah explained that the festival provided an alternative to the mass-market films. "The reason why we put so much emphasis on our Asian program at the festival is because this is something that Asians don't see very much of.

"When Asia began to get multiplex cinemas, and this represented the arrival of globalisation in cinema, only certain kinds of movies started entering the scene. The early promise of the multiplex system that you would get more variety because there were more screens was an illusion. It wasn't true at all. What you now have is all these screens showing exactly the same kind of thing.

"In the end film festivals have become the art cinemas. In fact, all the art cinemas in Singapore have died—they have all gone in the last three years. Our festival is the last place in Singapore where you can see a real variety of decent movies from around the world. We are the last holdout."

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