

Serangoon Road: a bridge for co-production and cultural learnings in the Asia-Pacific

By Caroline Wong

[Serangoon Road](#) is an Australian-Singapore ten part TV series. A detective noir drama set in the sixties, *Serangoon Road* is set in a time when Singapore was breaking away from Malaysia and becoming an independent state. As well as the turbulence occurring in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia at the time, the drama also references conflict in Vietnam with one of characters playing the role of a CIA agent.

Premiering in September 2013, *Serangoon Road* is a co-production between Australia's ABC TV, Great Western Entertainment in Western Australia, HBO Asia and Singapore's Infinite Frameworks together with the participation of the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA), ScreenWest and Australian Government's Export Finance and Insurance Corporation (EFIC).

Promoted as HBO Asia's first original series, the drama is an ambitious undertaking, not least for the obvious problems of dealing with cultural issues in ways that are entertaining yet palatable to different audiences. Pan-Asian co-productions have been common in recent times with an increasing number of collaborative projects forming between film and TV producers in South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. In Australia the formation of the [Australia-China Screen Alliance](#) in 2011 signals that producers are now looking to the biggest market of all to make movies despite the attendant problems of censorship and bureaucracy.

The casting of Asian celebrities is often strategic, bridging markets and in many instances contributing to the strengthening of cultural relationships. However, placing characters from different cultural hemispheres in the narrative is fraught with challenges. Yet this is what the writers of *Serangoon Road* have undertaken.

Australia has been forging ahead with its efforts to move into co-productions with Asian partners. The report [Common Ground: Opportunities for Australian Screen Partnerships in Asia](#), commissioned by Screen Australia, features a cover image of two of the lead characters of *Serangoon Road*, one Asian, and one Australian. The report notes that 58 percent of Australian producers interviewed regarded Asian co-productions as an opportunity for their businesses.

Many in the industry also see film co-production with Singapore as a major initiative for strengthening Australia's cultural engagement and exchange with Asia, as defined in the former Labor Government's [Asian Century White Paper](#). With recent diplomatic imbroglios over spying damaging Australia's soft power in the region, the importance of co-productions is obvious, especially now that [the Abbott government has jettisoned](#) the White Paper in favour of some yet to be announced Asian strategy. The former Arts Minister, [Simon Crean](#)

commented: 'The people-to-people links forged through collaborations such as *Serangoon Road* open up new opportunities for cultural engagement and strengthen our business, political and trade relationships in Asia. Our vision is to become one of Asia's leading producers of film, TV and new media content for a global audience'.

Erika North, head of programming at HBO Asia and executive producer on the series noted that the film would not have gotten off the ground had it not been developed in both Singapore and Australia with government support from both countries. Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA) is a financier and Australia's Screenwest is the other. HBO Asia is the distributor and is hoping that the more viewers see local influences on 'Serangoon Road', the more they will be willing to travel it.

The film blends both Eastern and Western elements in creating a pan-Asian drama with strong Asian characters, offering a fresh but accurate depiction of Asian history and identity. In *Serangoon Road* the lead characters are a diverse mix: Australian, Singaporean, Indonesian, British and American. One of the leading characters in the series is Patricia Cheng, played by veteran actress Joan Chen, best known for her appearances in *The Last Emperor*, *Twin Peaks*, and *Mao's Last Dancer*. Cheng runs a detective agency and is joined by rugged-looking Aussie actor Don Hany, who plays Sam Callaghan. A number of other colourful characters populate the narrative, which involves Chinese mafia, murder, contraband, ménage-a-trois, and international affairs.

Location shoots for *Serangoon Road* took place at some of Singapore's best known landmarks, including the Raffles Hotel and former colonial houses and heritage buildings. However, most of the shooting action occurred at Infinite Studios' facilities in Batam, Indonesia, where replicas of Bugis Street and Chinatown of old Singapore were built.

Co-production and the growth of the Singapore film industry

Serangoon Road is the latest of a slate of co-productions filmed in Singapore. In the 1990s, the government's efforts to expand the country's services sector included identifying filmmaking as a potential economic growth area. The plan was for Singapore to become a regional hub for international film production and distribution with state of the art media production and post-production facilities.

The Singapore screen industry developed rapidly with government support and sought ways to build talent and expertise. In 2003, the Media Development Authority (MDA) was formed with the merger of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority, the Films and Publications Department and the Singapore Film Commission (SFC). However, one of the greatest challenges facing the industry is creative content. Co-production is seen as the way forward to circumvent this challenge.

Singapore is an active supporter of the co-production model. The MDA endeavours to broker relationships between local and foreign partners. Some of Singapore's established local

production houses have been invited to showcase their works at the annual Cannes Film Festival in Paris as well as establish networking and collaboration sessions with would-be foreign partners. The MDA facilitates co-production agreements and collaborations with overseas government and industry organizations. MDA and its partners (such as the production houses) have been adopting a global approach, forming international strategic and business alliances across borders and cultures ranging from the US to Europe and Asia.

This has resulted in quite a few potential partnerships with treaties and memoranda of understanding (MOU) signed with countries such as America, New Zealand, Korea, Australia, China, Italy, France, Canada and Indonesia in the last 10 years. Bilateral co-production agreements with targeted countries are one way to develop new markets for made-by-Singapore content as co-productions attempt to secure foreign exhibition from the early planning stage. Co-production is also seen a way to improve program quality and address challenges from new competitors.

One of the main benefits of co-production agreements is that an approved film can be considered a national production in each of the co-production countries so that producers can apply for any benefits or programs of assistance available in either country, including investment and tax incentives. Singaporean companies are eligible for grants of up to 40 per cent of the Singapore spend on a television, film, game or interactive media production. To encourage a sustained flow of projects, [MDA grants a further 10 per cent](#) of the Singapore spend of a Singaporean company's current project for its next project.

Singapore is an attractive partner in co-production as it is the broadcast hub in Asia. It has 17 international cable and satellite broadcasters, including HBO, ESPN, MTV, Disney and Discovery. Many of them use Singapore as their regional headquarters in the region. Leading animation and gaming companies such as Japanese Koei and Genki and Italy's top animation studio [Rainbow S.p.A](#) have also established their content development studios in Singapore. In 2004, Australia's Southern Star Group established its only digital animation studio in Singapore.

Australian-Singapore co-productions showcase how collaboration occurs between many stakeholders, the main ones being policy makers, the production houses and distribution networks. The relationship between the two nation's industries has been spurred by the Australia-Singapore co-production MOU signed in 2007 which came into force in 2008 with the MDA's active approach to supporting the local industry to work with international partners. Since the signing of the Australia-Singapore MOU, many successful co-productions have ensued between the two countries.

Several partnerships between Australian and Singaporean media companies have resulted in successful productions. One example is [Home Song Stories](#) (2007). This film was co-produced by Australia's Big and Little Films and Porchlight Films with investment from Singapore MediaCorp Raintree Pictures, which distributed the film in Singapore and Malaysia.

The Australia's Film Finance Corporation provided the majority of finance. The film received

14 nominations at the 2007 Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards and was also nominated for awards in the foreign language film category of the Oscars. Home Song Stories took home a total of five awards at the Inside Film Awards held in Australia in November 2007.

There have been a number of official and unofficial animation co-productions including *Guess How Much I love You, Milly Molly (2006)* by Pacific & Beyond (Australia) and Scrawl Studios (Singapore) and *Master Raindrop (2008)* by Greenpatch Productions (Australia) and Big Communications (Singapore) along with Flux Animation (New Zealand). Live action children's series *A Gurls World* also had Australian and Singaporean partners.

From the [Australian producers' perspectives](#) the factors most commonly perceived as opportunities include co-financing, official co-productions, the appeal of their content to the Singaporean market and co-ventures. The presence of a number of international broadcasters and media companies (such as HBO Asia and Discovery Networks Asia-Pacific) in Singapore also makes it an attractive partner. The financial returns are perceived as lucrative according to the Common Ground survey of producers: 56 per cent of the Australian producers expected their revenue to expand and almost 10 per cent indicated it will expand significantly.

Not all alliances result in a net positive experience in which both partners gain in learning. Sometimes it can be a zero sum game in which the partner learning the fastest dominates the relationship. In some cases failure to gain access to partner knowledge results in unequal benefits accruing out of such collaboration. Ideally, the primary interest of international joint ventures is aimed at joint innovative efforts in which both organisations share technical knowledge.

According to the Common Ground Report challenges of greater engagement with the Singaporean screen industry include the lack of knowledge/expertise within their business and the fact that Singapore has a small broadcast market. Firms that rely on strategic alliances to secure access to competitive advantage may find their internal skill sets deteriorating as they become 'locked out' from learning new skills and technologies critical to participating in the industry evolution. In that regard, co-production is not always equated with equal production in terms of inputs and outcomes.

Many Australian production companies are already realising the benefits of partnering with Singaporean companies. There will be ongoing opportunities for production partnerships for Australian producers including official and unofficial co-productions, especially in the animation sector. MDA has committed itself along this line and will continue to pursue co-productions as the way forward for the Singapore screen and media industry.

While it's too early to know if Serangoon Road has achieved its measure of success, there is no doubt that the experience opens up more possibilities. According to producers, writers and actors there have been many cultural learnings. One of the key actors Don Hany found Serangoon Road [a unique history lesson](#), and his mostly Asian co-stars' traits rubbed off on him. 'Without a doubt...I noticed particularly Asian politeness, or patience towards work...I

really enjoyed letting Asian sensibilities affect me,' Hany said during a teleconference with journalists from the region..

A bridge has now been established.

