

Radiant Colours and Textures: The Importance of Natural Resources and Their Influences to Malaysian Animation

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Abstract

Malaysia is moving forward in its animation industry, aiming to produce animation with global standard, and at the same time hoping to set its own standard in the eyes of the world. Unfortunately, while becoming very anxious to be globally recognised, many young animators couldn't really see that high quality animation, simply means it carries a profound local content and a story that has a 'soul'.

With or without remarkable special effects, animation alone can be very appreciable if it contains enough elements to enrich the whole production. In this case, colours and textures play a very significant role in enhancing overall animation production. A careful selection of colours and textures certainly could signify the content of the story.

As a country that is rich with its abundance of natural resources, Malaysia surely could serve as an impulsive database of colours and textures. Its wide range of wildlife and natural beauty could be offered as a feast for audience's eyes from all over the world.

When those colours and textures of nature are carefully selected, blended to the story, composed and later used in any of Malaysian animation production, definitely, the production will be uniquely 'Malaysian'. The difficult task is not solely to create a magnificent realistic environment, but most importantly to reflect the Malaysian identity, mood and atmospheric of the Malaysian lifestyle into the visual of animation.

Malaysia as a country that has a diverse community that comprises 3 major races: Malay, Chinese and Indian, obviously have a lot more interesting elements to offer. Each of this ethnic society carries their own unique identity- their lifestyle, rituals and their own interpretation of colours.

If blindly captured from nature, there is an ongoing list of those colours and textures elements that can signify Malaysian identity, but the issue that needs to be addressed here is how much, how little or how critical it is to deliver the right message.

Introduction—Computer Animation Industry in Malaysia

In Malaysia, animated films have shown positive development since Hikayat Sang Kancil, the first animated short film made in 1983 produced by Filem Negara Malaysia (National Film of Malaysia). Gillie Porter was the person responsible in introducing animations to the silver screen, while Goh Meng Huat was the first animator in Malaysia.¹

An ambition to expedite Malaysian Information and Communication Technology industry resulted in the launching of Multimedia Super Corridor in 27 Jun 1998. Cyberjaya City was formed in this vicinity, aiming to be an intelligent city mirroring Silicone Valley in the United States. Here, animation becomes the large portion of technology that they wish to expand.

E-Village, which was later established in September 2000 as part of Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor, also aims to accelerate the growth of animation and multimedia industry.

To date, more and more higher learning institutions in Malaysia are offering courses in multimedia and animation. Through these active numbers of students taking such courses in local and foreign universities, the country is confident that animation industry in Malaysia will substantially develop further in a very near future.

Malaysian Culture: The Colour Pallets and Their Significance

Some Facts and History of Malaysia and Its Culture

It was found that Homo sapiens have been in Malaysia for a long time. The oldest known evidence of human habitation is a skull from the Niah Caves in Sarawak dating from 35,000 years B.C.²

Today, Malaysia is made up of 13 states and 3 federal territories, which comprises Johor, Melaka, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Sabah, Sarawak, Terengganu, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Kedah, Perlis, Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan and Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya.

Historically, Hindu-Buddhist influence was strong in the centuries before the coming of Islam. By 1400, when the Malacca Sultanate was at the height of its power, Islam had become a major influence. In 1511, Portuguese came and invaded Malacca followed by the Dutch in 1641. In 1815 Malacca fell into British's hand. In 1819, Stamford Raffles founded Singapore and thereafter, the British slowly extended their control over all the states of the Malay Peninsula. By 1920s, all the states that eventually comprised Malaysia were under British control. Finally, Federation of Malaya gained independence from the British in 1957.

Malaysia was created in 1963 through the merging of Malaya and the former British Singapore, both of which formed West Malaysia, and Sabah and Sarawak in north Borneo, which composed East Malaysia. Singapore separated from the union in 1965.

Through this long history of Malaysian formation, Malaysia has developed a diverse and complex multiracial culture yet to be effectively presented and recognised by the world.

Kaleidoscope of Cultures: Finding a Colourful Harmony

The term 'culture' has three important meanings: a refined understanding of the arts and other intellectual achievements of a country; a classical heritage of the customs and a civilisation of a particular time or people; the original etymological meaning as a nourishing human habitat.³

In Malaysian society, religion and culture play very important roles. Cultures was mixed, matched and engaged in Malaysia since the very beginning of its history. Malaysia's cultural mosaic is made up by three major different cultures, which are Malay, Chinese and Indian. Some other indigenous tribes, many of which live in the forests and coastal areas of Borneo, join these three groups. Although each of these cultures has strongly maintained its traditions and community structures, they have also blended together to create contemporary Malaysia's uniquely diverse heritage.

Although self-contained ethnic communities frequently maintain Malaysia's different cultural traditions, all Malaysians are very acceptive to members of other cultures during a religious festival. From here, we see that Malaysians are more receptive to appreciate any differences of other cultures and blending them in their own daily life.

Within the context of local festivities, it is almost impossible to see any individual colour pallet in particular. All the colour pallets belong to different ethnic groups are blended in harmony to signify the unity of Malaysians. For example, red, which is of great significant to the Chinese, with strong psychological, spiritual and social connotations can also be seen used by different cultures. It could easily be spotted during festivities that all the different cultures use mix-and-match colour pallets to amplify the festive moods.

The Colour Pallets: Cultural Representations and Significant Attributes

Colours have significant and distinctive signs; they categorise, explain and stress of many ideas. Colours bear

social codes that introduce connotations and symbols. They also symbolised a vital mystery, knowledge, regeneration, and even immortality.⁴

For Malaysians, every single ethnic group's way of life is greatly influenced by their religion and for most of them; religion becomes the yardstick to refer to for dos and don'ts. In Malaysia, most Malays are Muslims, Chinese are Buddhists and Indians are Hindus, while Christian is also a religion for some Chinese and Indians.

When we discuss about colour pallets belonging to these ethnic groups, we will also need to include religions. We will briefly discuss about the cultural and religious connotations of colours in Malaysia's different ethnic groups.

Muslim and The Malays: The Colour Pallets and Significant Characteristics

Art in Islam has essential qualities, which promote the essential good of mankind. For Muslim Malays, careful selection of colours present a picture that not only looks good, but also makes one think and inquire deeper.

The colour green is a traditional symbol of Islam.⁵ Blue-and-white is another set of colours reflecting Islamic arts during Ottoman period in the late fifteenth century and later in this era; bright colours like red and deep cobalt were used. For Muslims, white means purity, mercy, peace and wisdom. Because of this, most of the clothing used in religious ceremony is white.

Currently, colours used in Malaysian Muslim society have been fully adapted from the multi-racial Malaysian lifestyle. Even while most Malays are Muslim, the colour pallets used in their day-to-day living are not significantly different to many other Malaysian societies.

Apart from religion influences, Malays have another significant colour. Yellow is acknowledged as a royal colour symbolising sovereignty, wisdom and power of the royalty. It is a known taboo for a commoner to wear yellow in the appearance of royalty.

Buddhism and The Chinese: The Colour Pallets and Significant Characteristics

To Chinese, regardless whether they are Buddhist or Christian, red is the most significant colour. Non-Chinese might associate red to Chinese as prosperity, but it also represents good luck, joy, fertility and good fortune. Black in Chinese means evil and white is the symbol of death and mourning.

Currently, colours used in Malaysian Chinese society have taken other elements from diverse Malaysian lifestyle. Apart from red, other colours are often used and adopted from their surroundings.

Hinduism and the Indians: The Colour Pallets and Significant Characteristics

For the Indians, the most significant colour is Indigo, the colour of the Hindu god Krishna.⁶

Apart from that, the Hindus are very fond of bright and radiant colours like red, gold, saffron, tangerine, fuchsia, purple, parrot green, chartreuse and crimson. Most of these colours can be found in their sari design.⁷

As other Malaysians, Indians have the same attitude towards colours, being very receptive and tolerant to

appreciate the differences of Malaysian multi-colour palettes.

Faces and Moods

Three major races in Malaysia have distinct facial features differentiating them from one to the other. These facial features plus their skin colour may be recognised by local and foreign audiences and therefore these characteristics need to be established.

Facial expression of characters within an animated film portrays the identity of a character. Moods and expressions that are topical to Malaysians can be further divided into three different races, which is unique to Malaysia. Diasporas of people and language provided an interesting opportunity for scriptwriters and directors in developing a storyline. While it is hardly possible for a foreigner without local knowledge to examine the origin of a character based on skin colour and facial expression, the same cannot be said for a local audience.

In general, there are three colour-skin tones that may be applied to Malaysian characters. The fairest of the three races are the Chinese. The Malays' skin-colour ranges from fair to dark, associated with the environment they live and work. People who live by the sea are usually more tanned, while those who live and work in an inland urban area stay indoor most of the times, hence the fairer skin tone.

The skin colour of Malays is referred as 'sawo-matang', a Malay word referring to a colour from a local fruit the sapodilla. The Malays are known as the brown race⁸ with mostly black and wavy hair with medium-sized eyes. The Indians are the darkest amongst the three races. While there are some fair-skinned Malaysian Indians who were originally from the Northern India – who shares the same skin-colour with the Sikh, the majority of Indians are dark-skinned.

Facial expressions of these races are difficult to emulate. However, there are distinguishing marks between the races. The Chinese face has always been portrayed with slit-eyes, while the Indian's nose is sharper than the other two races, though visually less sharp than the white people from Europe or Northern America.

One other important trait that is applied to characters in Malaysian animation is the clothing. For a female character, the Chinese can be distinguished wearing a skirt or a short, while the Malays are drawn as wearing the traditional dress such as 'baju kurung'. For the Malay men, distinguishing items may include the 'songkok', a velvet black cap worn for religious purposes, and 'kain pelikat', a type of sarong normally with checked patterns.

Malaysia has tropical climate with moderate temperature ranging between 27° - 32°C and it is sunny all year long; therefore; the colour palettes used in Malaysia are also heavily influenced by this phenomena. According to psychologist E. R. Jaensch,⁹ research indicates those who live in climates with a lot of sunlight prefer warm bright colours; while those from climates with less sunlight prefer cooler, less saturated colours.

Extracting and Categorizing Colours of Malaysia

Recognizing and Establishing Animation Colour Palettes in Malaysian Context

With Malaysian animation industry being in its infancy, there is an ongoing effort by researchers and animators to establish a true 'Malaysian' colour identity. Establishing a concept of 'Malaysian' colour scheme is one challenging task that will take more than a few years.

Because of the nature of its complexity and very few researches have been done on this matter, perceptions of colours by different animators varied accordingly to their own understandings and interpretations. In order to introduce a true 'Malaysian' colour scheme, an effort should be made to collectively summarise and visualise all the perceptions about Malaysian colour palettes introduced by local artists, writers and animators.

In some local animations, the colour palettes were very vivid and flat similar to Japanese Manga or early Disney 2D animation such as Mickey Mouse. While in others, the colour palettes were bright with detailed colour, shadow and intensity, probably influenced by the more recent Disney colour schemes as seen in *The Emperor's New Groove* and *The Road to El Dorado*.

This inconsistency of colour palettes make Malaysian animation industry seems disoriented in search of identity. We need a common ground that everybody can refer to and through serious observations; Lat's *The Kampung Boy* is a very good example that amplified Malaysian colour scheme. Lat is a legendary cartoonist in Malaysia who provides his audience with endless amusement and invaluable insights into Malaysian culture and society.¹⁰

Colour palettes between different countries in different regions differ. Malaysia, being in the tropics, is a country filled with naturally vibrant, warm colours as can be seen from its plants, vegetations and animals. In order for an animation to express the local beauty, the colour and texture applied for details surrounding the characters must reflect the real environment. As an example, the colour palette used for the film *The Lion King* was associated with the landscape of African plain.

For Malaysian animators studying local vegetation that symbolises the local environment, it is important that type of plants chosen must be unique. For example, usage of coconut trees is popular in comparison to other trees indistinguishable to trees found in colder regions such as pine.

Exaggeration and Amplifying for Maximum Recognition

In order for a colour scheme to be highly successful in portraying a specific idea, its application can be amplified. Similarly as an artist exaggerate certain features in one character so that we can immediately recognise the connection, colours or combination of colours were treated the same. To distinguish the skin colour of a Malay and a Chinese, the different in tones must be striking.

In reality, the skin colour of a Chinese and a Malay living and working within the same area and activities do not greatly differ. In order for an artist to portray the beauty of a Malay princess, the skin colour specified is

usually very light. This goes in parallel with the treatment given to a princess whereby there are always her maids making sure she is not exposed to the sun. Also, this fulfils the notion in the local society that fairer skin is considered beautiful.

Evaluation – Looking at Effectiveness

To evaluate the effectiveness of the colour palette used in Malaysian animation, we established several parameters. First of all, the colour scheme used must be judged successful or unsuccessful on the basis of the maximum feeling of locality perceived by watching the film. Exaggeration and amplification of colours and textures are accepted as among the methods applied.

Secondly, the layers of objects within a scene are divided into suitable categories so that details of characters, its surrounding objects and background can be studied separately. This is important in studying the source, evaluating its relevancy and to critically analyse if it can be further improved.

Lastly, each selected scene is rated on its effectiveness. It is important to note that all of the above parameters were designed to study the effects of colours and textures without looking at the storyline and scripting.

Although it is accepted that a strong storyline and script will provide better understanding of the locality, this research intend to focus specifically on the effectiveness of colours and textures.

Analysis of Selected Animations from Malaysia

Establishing the Selection Criteria

Before we move to select the specific scenes to evaluate the characters and its surroundings, we need to establish criteria in selecting a scene. Within the three films reviewed, there are mixed styles of environments. Scenes in Putih depicted environment of the Malay villages and towns in the 1400s, while Lat's The Kampung Boy portrays the idyllic life in a small town on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. Scenes from Mann Spider were alternated between the 15th century Malacca and the modern day Kuala Lumpur.

Each of the scenes will need to fulfil at least two of the four criteria below:

1. There must be at least two characters in a natural surrounding
2. There must be at least two characters in a man-made structure, typical of that time period
3. There must be at least two different layers of grounds, one as a background, and another depicting details of natural creations such as vegetations, flowers or animals
4. There must be at least two different layers, one being the man-made structures such as a of a house made from local material, and another being the furnishing that can be studied in detail.

The criteria were set up not merely to ensure the positive aspects of each scene; rather, they were specified to provide space for critical analysis in pinpointing the misgivings within the scene.

Evaluation Elements for Colour and Textures

Within a scene, these are the elements we looked at:

1. Background. This may include sky, hills and mountains, paddy fields and earth/ground ending in the horizon.
2. Middle ground. This may include trees, vegetation, shrubs, flowers and other type of plants of which were not the focus of the scene.
3. Foreground. This may include man-made objects such as furniture, houses, and its interior made of natural material which may consist of wall and ceilings
4. Costume. This may include clothing worn by the characters in focus, all types of dress, textiles, and accessories worn either on the body or attached to the dress.
5. Human face and skin. These elements specifically focused on facial, skin colour, texture and wrinkles. Also, we will look at specific distinguishing features of each character.
6. Animals. While this area might be of less importance in comparison to the elements above, we will consider the size and proportion of the animals, their colour, skin, and what they 'wear'.

Case Studies

Three Malaysian animations were chosen as case studies, Mann Spider, Putih and The Kampung Boy. Mann Spider is a combination of 2D and 3D animation produced by Lensa Film. The story is about time travel by a group of boys from present day back to the time of Malaccan Sultanate. The storyline is similar to 'Back to the Future', with the topical use of local content and side stories such as the origin of the name Malacca. The main plot was based on a life of a boy named Mann who had just moved into a new place and having trouble settling-in into his new environment.

Putih is a 2D animation based loosely on a Malay folklore Bawang Putih Bawang Merah, produced by Fine Animation, a local production house that produced Silat Lagenda, the first Malaysian animation in 1998. Top local actors and actress were invited to bring the characters alive. Touted as the Malay version of Cinderella, the storyline is simple and targeted at audiences at all ages.

The Kampung Boy animation series were based on the best-selling graphic novel of the same name by artist Mohamad Nor Khalid, or better known as Lat. The story revolves around the life of a village boy called Mamat, his adventures, family and friends, as they rely on ingenuity, family ties and friendship to maintain traditional family values in an ever-changing technology-obsessed world.

Colour and Texture Review of the Film

Lat and The Kampung Boy

The Kampung Boy intermingled all three races in Malaysia through characters of Indian and Chinese background. With Mamat's father working as a civil servant, they lead a simple life in a natural beauty surrounding - bushes and clear stream were part of the picture, all in an idyllic village life. The colours of vegetations were mostly bright and warm. Different

shades of green, yellow, red and brown were used to amplify the kampung mood.

Added to this scene were the pleasantly chaotic elements such as coming into contact with an evil spirit and the boys' circumcision ceremony. All these scenes were pictured through a good use of local colour and texture resources.

Houses and buildings in this animation were well presented with real colours and textures of Malaysian flavour, including minor details such as tiny cracks on walls and roof. Skin colours differentiate one race to the other successfully while for animals, the colours and textures used very closely reflected the nature. In some scenes, the colours and textures were exaggerated, making it more vibrant. The textures of costumes very much presented real environment of Malaysian lifestyle. Among others, there were elements of batik and pelikat, two types of sarong worn in Malaysia.

Putih

Putih is the name of the main character, a young maiden of exceptional beauty who together with her mother, were forced to live under the beck and call of her stepmother and stepsister. The scene is from the 1400s, therefore characters in the film were depicted wearing costumes not seen in contemporary life. In a nutshell, the laidback and merriness of village life mixed with scenes from the palace, a royal wedding and ended up with a victorious war.

The background colours in this animation are lesser in intensity as compared to *The Kampung Boy*. The chosen colours and textures scheme is interesting but somehow did not truly reflect the vibrant elements of local environment.

At the very beginning of the film, there was a scene taken during the harvesting season. The sky was blue; the paddy plants were golden-yellow indicating that they were ripe to harvest. Looking at the clothing, it was clear they were a group of ordinary folks, men and women singing and dancing, enjoying a good harvest. In later part of the film, there was a similar cheerful mood through singing and dancing, yet, through their vibrant colourful clothing, audience knew that they were dancers of the king, performing their art in the opulence interior of the palace.

Details of skin colours were monotonous. Almost everybody has the same skin texture, only the colour differs. On the other hand, there were also scenes where both men and women have the same skin tone. One possible explanation is due to their long hours working in the paddy fields under the hot blazing sun. Even so, there is no difference in skin texture between old and young people. Their skin looks the same with no wrinkles to show their age save for their hair colours. Putih's mother appeared to be darker-skinned than her daughter, which relates nicely to the storyline in which the evil stepmother forced the mother to do all the hard work such as working in the paddy fields.

Buildings, houses and costumes were also very flat in colours and textures. There was no given stress to amplify the status. It was obvious that they were not of a rich family by looking at the house they lived in. The texture of the wall interior, which is of unvarnished wood, was

coarse. In the scene where the mother applied bandage to Putih's hand, the animator showed the essence of a basic traditional mat where they sat on, brownish in colour and looks simple, again to show their poverty.

Putih was supposed to be introduced as more distinct compared to Merah and the stepmother, an aspect this film did not successfully portray. Even though the royal yellow colour was maintained in all the scenes, the Sultan's yellow 'Baju Melayu' was rather plain without much adornment.

For the main animals Gemul (the cat) and Mikus (the mouse), the colours were flat, probably influenced by earlier Disney animations such as Mickey Mouse, albeit the outline was not as thick. Gemul's fur, grey with dark grey spots looks fine and match all the scenes well. However, the pink and purple Mikus looks out of place, ill-matching the overall chosen pallets.

Mann Spider

Mann Spider created a difference through combining 2D animation with 3D environments. The effects were remarkable and realistic and managed to add a more variant flavour to the animation.

The environments depicted were similar to scenarios from *The Kampung Boy* where the background colours and textures were vivid, bright and realistic. In Mann Spider, remarkable effects such as rippling waterfalls, stardust and smokes were done in 3D while all of the effects in *The Kampung Boy* were in 2D. The colours of vegetations were very bright, colourful and vibrant, there were several shades of green for the shrubs and bushes. Different shades of yellow, brown and red were used for the flowers. Due to this, the scenes looked extremely rich and full with joyful elements.

The characters were heavily influenced by Japanese character styles where they have large eyes. The villains in this animation also were also very much influenced by Japanese evil characters.

Overall colours and textures were nicely blended even though they were combinations of 2D and 3D. The compositing effects were done successfully for the Sultan's palace. The 3D building matches the 2D background and look as if they were in the same environment.

Because of the nature of 3D buildings and environments, all the visible details can be easily amplified and shown to the audience. Lighting effects also play important role to exaggerate the textures.

Skin/costumes colours and textures were also done in detail. As there were visible shades of tones in skin textures, there were also almost distinct differences between good, bad, men, women, races and royalty. However, the costumes used did not successfully reflect true Malaysian motifs, as all of the costumes were plain without any patterns even for the princess. As in Putih, the king's costume maintained the royal yellow colour.

The animals in this animation were successfully pictured in the same mode. The colours of the deer, the dog and the elephant have different shades to show forms and volumes but the texture is almost flat.

In general, Mann Spider shows a unique approach to establish Malaysian taste on colours and textures with

rooms for improvement especially on the use of Malaysian patterns and motifs for costumes.

Conclusion

Malaysian young animators are ambitious to create something spectacular. Without realising the fact that colours and textures play crucial roles, they invested more time in special effects which is seen as magical.

Good and strong fundamentals in colour and textures are important in giving a story a good 'look', which in turn will reel the audience in. While creative storytelling is a crucial element in filmmaking, the overall look and feel of animations play an equal or sometimes a greater task.

To maintain audience's attention, animation has to be filled with excitements. Even though excitements have to be consistent and the story has to be 'real', the appearance of reality is better delivered when it is exaggerated or amplified.

While animators work diligently at manipulating and exaggerating motion or movement on the characters or images, aesthetic value also needs to be given more serious attention. Aesthetic values should cover the overall 'beauty' of the animation which includes colours and textures especially when the colours and textures have distinct and profound local elements.

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Biography

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