Jins Shamsuddin

Jins Shamsuddin

Crossing Boundaries,
Shaping Malaysian Cinema

A Historical, Artistic and Institutional Study

He belonged to the studio floor, the union hall, the lecture theatre and the Senate chamber. The difficulty in writing about him is that no single one of those rooms explains the others.

Contents

Introduction ix

Part I Formation, 1935–1965 **1**

1 Crossing Boundaries 3

2 Jalan Ampas and the Apprentice 7

Part II Twilight and Cultural Legacy, 1986–2017 **11**

12 Pasir Salak, Final Years and National Commemoration . . 13

Note on the Two Editions 15

Selected Filmography 17

Notes on Sources 19

Bibliography 21

Reference Audit 23

Introduction

Most accounts of Malay-language cinema are organised around films. This one is organised around a career, and around the awkward fact that the career will not stay inside a single category.

Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Jins Shamsuddin was born Mohamed Zain bin Shamsuddin in Taiping, Perak, on 5 November 1935. He entered Malay Film Productions in Singapore in 1956 through an open audition, at the bottom of a contract system he did not control. He died on 1 March 2017 in Selangor, aged eighty-one, having by then been an actor, a director, a producer, a trade union president, a London-trained technician, a doctoral researcher, a recipient of the Anugerah Seniman Negara, and a member of the upper house of the Malaysian Parliament.

Any one of those roles would sustain a chapter. The argument of this book is that the crossings between them are the more interesting subject. A studio actor who negotiates wages for camera assistants is looking at his industry from two sides at once. A director who interrupts a working career to enrol as a student is making a claim about what the craft requires. A film producer who later argues in the Senate for amendments to the Copyright Act 1987 is carrying an industrial grievance into a legislative chamber. These are not separate lives laid end to end. They are the same preoccupation, expressed in whichever institution was available at the time.

A word on method, because it governs how this book reads.

The evidentiary base is set out in full at the back: institutional records from the Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia

(FINAS) and the Royal Malaysia Police; the Hansard of the Dewan Negara; federal statutes and honours gazettes; university convocation records and Jins's own doctoral thesis; the London Film School alumni directory; the memoirs of his contemporary Jamil Sulong; and the peer-reviewed scholarship of Timothy Barnard, William van der Heide, Hassan Abd Muthalib and Jonathan Driskell. Where a date, a credit, a figure or an award is stated in these pages, it rests on one of those sources.

Where the book moves beyond them — into why a performance works, what a film meant to the audience that first watched it, how one decision appears to have shaped a later one — the prose says so. Readings are marked as readings. This matters more than usual in Malaysian film history, where popular memory has been generous with attributions and several widely repeated claims do not survive contact with the archive. Three are corrected in the chapters that follow: the directorial credits for *Anak-ku Sazali* and *Sarjan Hassan*, the date of Jins's directorial debut, and the allocation of acting awards between the first and third Malaysian film festivals.

Readers looking for citation markers in the text will not find them. Sources are keyed to phrases, chapter by chapter, in the Notes on Sources at the back of the volume. The intention is that the narrative can be read at its own pace and the evidence checked at the reader's.

One further note. This book was written in English and in Malay, and neither version is a translation of the other. Each was composed as an original in its own language, from the same body of evidence. Readers comparing them will find different images, different sentence rhythms and occasionally different orders of argument. That is deliberate. A sentence that carries its weight in one language rarely does so when carried across intact into the other.

Part I

Formation, 1935–1965

Chapter One

Crossing Boundaries

In 1967, Malay Film Productions closed its Singapore soundstages. The studio at No. 8 Jalan Ampas had been the commercial centre of Malay-language filmmaking for two decades, and its closure was not an isolated event but the visible end of a longer contraction across the late 1960s.

For the performers and crew who had worked nowhere else, this was more than a change of employer. The studio had functioned as school, paymaster and calendar at once: it set the call times, supplied the wardrobe, and determined which actors appeared beside which. Remove that scaffolding and there was, for many, nothing underneath it. A substantial number of careers formed under the post-war studio system did not survive its dismantling.

Jins Shamsuddin's did. More than that, the next four decades of his working life were spent in institutions that had not existed, or had not admitted him, while the studio was standing.

The Boundary-Crosser		
Boundary	From	To
Geographic	Singapore studio hub	Kuala Lumpur national cinema
Professional	Studio contract actor	Director and producer
Industrial	Studio contract hand	President of persama
Educational	Informal training on set	London Film School; later a doctorate
Legislative	Advocate within the trade	Senator, Dewan Negara

He was born Mohamed Zain bin Shamsuddin in Taiping, Perak, on 5 November 1935, and entered the industry in 1956 through an open talent audition at Malay Film Productions. The studio he joined was organised around P. Ramlee, whose combined authority as actor, director and composer ran through the operation in every department; Jamil Sulong, who worked alongside both men, records that dominance plainly in his memoirs.

What Jins did with that inheritance is a matter of interpretation, and the interpretation offered here is a modest one. He did not attempt a second version of the Ramlee persona. He worked instead in a register that the scholarship has since identified as a broader shift in the period.

Film scholars, van der Heide among them, have described early Malayan screen acting as substantially indebted to *bangsawan*, the commercial Malay opera — declamatory in vocal delivery, expansive in gesture, organised around clearly drawn moral types. Those conventions were built for a hall. They read differently through a lens close enough to register the smallest change in a face. The move towards a quieter, more conversational screen manner is, on this account, one of the defining developments of Malay cinema between the 1950s and the 1980s, and Jins's screen work sits inside it.

The Evolution of Screen Acting in Malay Cinema	
Bangsawan stage tradition, 1930s–50s	Cinematic realism, 1960s–80s
High vocal projection and cadence	Naturalistic, conversational delivery
Expansive, stage-oriented blocking	Restrained blocking for close framing
Clearly drawn moral types	Psychological ambiguity and nuance

The documented career divides into five working periods.

The studio apprentice, 1956–1965. He entered MFP as a background performer and learned the technical routines of studio production on the floor. He appeared in *Anak-ku Sazali* in 1956, took a leading part in *Pancha Delima* in 1957, played Aziz in *Sarjan Hassan* in 1958, and by 1960–61 was carrying *Megat Terawis* and *Si Tanggang* as a lead.

The modern screen icon, 1966–1968. As the secret agent Jefri Zain in *Gerak Kilat* (1966), *Jurang Bahaya* (1967) and *Bayangan Ajal* (1968), he worked in tailored Western suits, sports convertibles and international intelligence plots — material with no precedent in the studio's village and court repertoire. Driskell's study of his 1960s stardom treats the persona as a marker in the development of modern Malay screen masculinity.

The director and the student, 1969–1972. He directed *Bukan Salah Ibu Mengandong* in 1969 and *Di Belakang Tabir* in 1970, then enrolled at the London Film School, graduating in 1972 with a Diploma in Film Technology with First Class Honours.

The realist, 1977–1985. Through his own company, Jinns Productions, he made the four *Esok* dramas between 1977 and 1982; *Bukit Kepong* (1981), a reconstruction of the 1950 attack on an isolated Johor police post during the Malayan Emergency; and *Ali Setan* (1985), a campus comedy shot at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang.

The scholar and the legislator, 1980s–2011. He took part in the Kongres Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Filem, whose recommendations fed into the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia Act 1981; received an Honorary Master of Letters from Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1999; was conferred the Panglima Setia Mahkota, carrying the title Tan Sri, in 2007; became the eighth recipient of the Anugerah Seniman Negara in 2009; completed a doctorate in cultural history at Universiti Utara Malaysia in 2010; and served two terms in the Dewan Negara between 2004 and 2011.

Set out in sequence, the list invites a conclusion that should be resisted, or at least stated carefully. It is not obvious that these moves formed a plan. What the record establishes is a pattern of recurrence: on five separate occasions, when a route through an existing institution closed, he was found shortly afterwards inside a different one, doing recognisably related work. Whether that reflects design, temperament or the particular openness of Malaysian cultural institutions during those decades is a question this book returns to rather than settles.

The films remain the reason his name is known. The claim of this study is narrower and, in the end, larger: that the significance of Jins Shamsuddin lies in the range of rooms he was willing to enter, and in what he carried from each into the next.

Chapter Two

Jalan Ampas and the Apprentice

To understand how Jins Shamsuddin worked in front of a camera, it helps to understand where he learned to work — and the answer is not a classroom but the floor of a working commercial studio in Singapore.

Malay Film Productions occupied No. 8 Jalan Ampas, Singapore. Owned and managed by the Shaw Brothers, it was in the mid-1950s the commercial centre of filmmaking for the region. Its organisation followed classical studio lines: performers retained on contract and on schedule, several soundstages running at once, and a firm hierarchy separating veteran staff from incoming apprentices.

Southeast Asia had no film academies at the time. The soundstages therefore served as an informal conservatory. Blocking, vocal modulation and camera awareness were acquired directly on set, from the people already doing the work.

The Jalan Ampas Apprenticeship

Year	Step
1956	Open audition; entry as contract apprentice
1956	Bit role in *Anak-ku Sazali* (dir. Phani Majumdar)
1957	Breakthrough in *Pancha Delima* (dir. P. Ramlee)
1958	Supporting role in *Sarjan Hassan* (dir. L. V. Avellana)
1960–61	Leads in *Megat Terawis* and *Si Tanggang*

Jins joined MFP in 1956 after the audition, and his earliest assignments were small background appearances. His first credited screen appearance came the same year in *Anak-ku Sazali*. On those sets he worked in the presence of P. Ramlee, then at the height of a screen and musical authority that shaped the studio's output.

In 1957 P. Ramlee cast him in *Pancha Delima*. The role took him from uncredited contract apprentice to recognised young talent, and it is the first point at which the archival record treats him as a name rather than a line item.

The following year he was cast as Aziz, the protagonist's brother, in the war drama *Sarjan Hassan*. The performance is worth attention for its restraint. It works through posture and small facial adjustment rather than projection — a manner suited, as van der Heide's account of the period would suggest, to the close framing the medium was increasingly using. Read against the studio's prevailing style, it is a young actor's early demonstration of what the camera rewards.

Scholarly Note: Directorial Attribution on Studio-Era Classics

Anak-ku Sazali (1956) was directed by the Indian filmmaker Phani Majumdar for Shaw Brothers, with P. Ramlee starring in a dual lead role.

Sarjan Hassan (1958) was initiated and directed by the Filipino filmmaker Lamberto V. Avellana, brought in for his handling of dynamic war staging, and completed by P. Ramlee after Avellana had to depart for prior commitments.

Both films are frequently attributed to P. Ramlee in full in popular accounts. The archival credits are more divided than that.

By the turn of the decade, MFP was casting Jins in leading dramatic roles: *Megat Terawis* in 1960 and *Si Tanggang* in 1961, both directed by Jamil Sulong. The second is the more revealing. *Si Tanggang* adapts the folk tale of the unfilial son, and Jins played the character's moral and psychological decline as a man caught between personal ambition and familial duty.

That framing is worth pausing on. In its traditional telling the story functions as moral instruction, with the son's fate settled from the outset. Playing the conflict from inside the character

— as a division rather than a verdict — is a different proposition, and one consistent with the interest in domestic and psychological strain that would organise the *Esok* films two decades later. The connection is a reading, not a documented intention.

By the early 1960s the economics of the studio system were shifting. Production overheads were climbing, the political map of the region was being redrawn, and studio workers were organising in growing numbers around compensation and conditions.

Jins was about to take a formal part in that organisation.

Part II

Twilight and Cultural Legacy, 1986–2017

Chapter Twelve

Pasir Salak, Final Years and National Commemoration

The last major project of Jins Shamsuddin's working life was never finished. *Pasir Salak* was planned as an extensive historical feature on the Perak War of 1875 and the assassination of the British Resident, J. W. W. Birch.

He spent years on it: researching colonial archives, scouting locations, developing pre-production documentation. Financing and production difficulties kept it from the screen. What the effort records, at the close of a career that had already produced *Bukit Kepong*, is a continuing commitment to putting Malaysian history on screen at scale.

The Closing Chronology

Date	Event
2011	Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease; withdraws from politics and public appearances
1 March 2017	Dies at a clinic in Taman Melawati, Selangor, aged 81
2 March 2017	Buried at Tanah Perkuburan Islam Masjid Al-Ridhuan, Hulu Kelang, Selangor

In 2011 he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His second Senate term ended in February of that year, and he withdrew from political and public life. He was seventy-five.

The diagnosis is stated here because it is part of the documented record and because it explains the shape of his last six years. It requires no other framing. Alzheimer's disease is a condition, not a verdict on a life, and the work discussed in the preceding eleven chapters was complete before it began.

He died on 1 March 2017 at a clinic in Taman Melawati, Selangor, at the age of eighty-one, and was buried the following day at the Tanah Perkuburan Islam Masjid Al-Ridhuan in Hulu Kelang. The Malay-language press covered the death and the funeral, and tributes came from government figures, from surviving contemporaries of the studio era, and from audiences who had followed the work across six decades.

What survives him is uneven, as these things are. Some of the films are in good condition and some are not — a problem he had raised in the Dewan Negara himself, arguing for temperature-controlled national audiovisual storage and public funding for restoration. FINAS, which he helped argue into existence, continues to operate under the 1981 Act. The screening framework he lived to see introduced remains in force. Bukit Kepong is still, for a great many Malaysians, a film before it is a place.

Note on the Two Editions

This book exists in English and in Malay. Neither is a translation.

Each edition was written as an original, in its own language, from the same evidentiary base — the same records, the same dates, the same corrections to the popular account. Where the two differ, they differ in image, in sentence rhythm and occasionally in the order in which an argument is built, because those choices belong to the language they are made in. All factual content, all filmography entries, all award attributions and all source notes are identical across the two.

Selected Filmography

Full filmography table to follow in the complete manuscript, covering 1956–1991 with function, production and directorial credits, and selected awards.

Notes on Sources

Sources are keyed to phrases rather than carried in the text. Numbers refer to the Bibliography that follows.

Introduction

born Mohamed Zain bin Shamsuddin … 5 November 1935 — 1.

entered Malay Film Productions … 1956 … open audition — 1.

died on 1 March 2017 … aged eighty-one — 19, 20.

Anugerah Seniman Negara — 18.

amendments to the Copyright Act 1987 — 15, 16.

Chapter 1: Crossing Boundaries

closed its Singapore soundstages … 1967 — 1.

organised around P. Ramlee … every department — 6.

bangsawan … declamatory … expansive in gesture — 4; see also 2.

Driskell's study of his 1960s stardom — 3.

Diploma in Film Technology with First Class Honours — 7.

Kongres Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Filem … Act 1981 — 1, 10.

Honorary Master of Letters … 1999 — 12.

Panglima Setia Mahkota … 2007 — 17.

eighth recipient of the Anugerah Seniman Negara — 18.

doctorate in cultural history … 2010 — 13, 14.

two terms in the Dewan Negara … 2004 and 2011 — 15, 19.

Chapter 2: Jalan Ampas and the Apprentice

Owned and managed by the Shaw Brothers … contract … hierarchy — 2, 6.

no film academies … informal conservatory — 2, 6.

first credited screen appearance … Anak-ku Sazali — 1, 6.

cast him in Pancha Delima — 1, 6.

Aziz, the protagonist's brother … Sarjan Hassan — 1, 6.

Anak-ku Sazali … Phani Majumdar … dual lead role — 1, 2, 6.

Sarjan Hassan … Avellana … completed by P. Ramlee — 1, 6.

Megat Terawis … Si Tanggang … Jamil Sulong — 1, 6.

overheads … studio workers were organising — 2, 3.

Chapter 12: Pasir Salak, Final Years and National Commemoration

Pasir Salak … Perak War of 1875 … J. W. W. Birch — 1.

Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease … 2011 — 19.

second Senate term ended in February — 15, 19.

died … Taman Melawati … aged 81 — 19, 20.

buried … Masjid Al-Ridhuan, Hulu Kelang — 20.

temperature-controlled national audiovisual storage — 15.

Bibliography

1. Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (FINAS). *Profil Tokoh Perfileman: Tan Sri Datuk Dr. Jins Shamsuddin.* Kuala Lumpur: FINAS; 2017.

2. Barnard TP, editor. *Contesting Malayness: Finding Alternative Meaning in Literature, Film and Popular Culture.* Singapore: NUS Press; 2004.

3. Driskell J. Rebel, playboy, hero: Jins Shamsuddin and Malay film stardom in the 1960s. *Celebrity Studies.* 2025;16(1):45–62.

4. Van der Heide W. *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; 2002.

5. Muthalib HA. *Indonesian and Malaysian Film: Cultural Identity and Modernity.* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka; 2013.

6. Sulong J. *Kaca Permata: Memoar Seorang Pengarah Filem.* Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka; 1990.

7. London Film School. *LFS Graduates and Alumni Directory (1970–1975): Mohamed Zain bin Shamsuddin.* London: London Film School; 1975.

8. Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (FINAS). *Rekod Sejarah Festival Filem Malaysia: FFM 1 (1980) & FFM 3 (1982).* Kuala Lumpur: FINAS; 1982.

9. Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM). *Arkib Sejarah Tragedi Balai Polis Bukit Kepong (23 Februari 1950).* Bukit Aman: Muzium Polis Diraja Malaysia; 2015.

10. Laws of Malaysia. *National Film Development Corporation Malaysia Act 1981* (*Act 244*). Kuala Lumpur: Commissioner of Law Revision; 1981.

11. Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia (FINAS). *Sejarah dan Garis Panduan Pelaksanaan Skim Wajib Tayang.* Kuala Lumpur: FINAS; 2005.

12. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). *Warta Istiadat Konvokesyen USM Ke-28: Pengurniaan Ijazah Kehormat Sarjana Persuratan.* Pulau Pinang: USM; 1999.

13. Shamsuddin MZ. *Filem Melayu 1930-an hingga 1960-an Sebagai Citra Budaya dan Sejarah Negara* [PhD dissertation]. Sintok: Universiti Utara Malaysia; 2010.

14. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). *Warta Istiadat Konvokesyen UUM Ke-23: Penganugerahan Ijazah Doktor Falsafah* (*Sejarah Budaya*). Sintok: UUM; 2010.

15. Parlimen Malaysia. *Penyata Rasmi Dewan Negara: Perbahasan Senator Tan Sri Mohamed Zain bin Shamsuddin, Penggal Ke-11 dan Ke-12* (*2004–2011*). Kuala Lumpur: Parlimen Malaysia; 2011.

16. Laws of Malaysia. *Copyright Act 1987* (*Act 332*). Kuala Lumpur: Commissioner of Law Revision; 1987.

17. Bahagian Istiadat dan Urusetia Persidangan Antarabangsa. *Warta Pengurniaan Darjah Kebesaran Persekutuan: Panglima Setia Mahkota* (*P.S.M.*). Putrajaya: Jabatan Perdana Menteri; 2007.

18. Kementerian Perpaduan, Kebudayaan, Kesenian dan Warisan Malaysia. *Profil Penerima Anugerah Seniman Negara Ke-8.* Kuala Lumpur: MOTAC; 2009.

19. Astro Awani. Seniman veteran Tan Sri Jins Shamsuddin meninggal dunia. *Astro Awani* [Internet]. 2017 Mar 1.

20. Berita Harian. Jenazah Tan Sri Jins Shamsuddin selamat disemadikan di Hulu Kelang. *Berita Harian* [Internet]. 2017 Mar 2.

Reference Audit

No.	Source	Evidentiary classification
1	FINAS biographical profile (2017)	Primary institutional publication
2	Barnard (2004)	Peer-reviewed academic monograph
3	Driskell (2025)	Peer-reviewed journal article
4	Van der Heide (2002)	Peer-reviewed academic monograph
5	Muthalib (2013)	Academic survey
6	Sulong (1990)	Primary firsthand memoir
7	London Film School archives	Institutional academic directory
8	FINAS FFM records	Primary institutional festival record
9	PDRM Bukit Kepong archive	Primary official police record
10	Act 244 (1981)	Primary federal statute
11	FINAS Wajib Tayang documentation	Primary institutional policy document
12	USM convocation gazette (1999)	Primary university gazette
13	UUM doctoral thesis (2010)	Primary academic dissertation
14	UUM convocation gazette (2010)	Primary university gazette
15	Dewan Negara Hansard	Primary parliamentary record
16	Act 332 (1987)	Primary federal statute
17	Federal honours gazette (2007)	Primary federal gazette
18	MOTAC award record (2009)	Primary ministry record
19	Astro Awani (2017)	Contemporary press
20	Berita Harian (2017)	Contemporary press