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**Boo Junfeng on funding, festivals and Chinese privilege**

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## Interviews

How Wee Ng

Interview

## Interview: Boo Junfeng on funding, festivals and Chinese privilege

Interview by How Wee Ng

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*The interview was motivated by an interest in exploring how Singapore film directors perceive the three major Chinese cinema awards, mainly the Golden Horse Awards*

*(GHA), Hong Kong Film Awards (HKFA) and Golden Rooster Awards (GRA), and what they might signify for Singapore cinema, especially for a nation that is predominantly ethnic Chinese. Amongst the directors interviewed, Boo Junfeng went beyond to share his views on film education, funding and the implications of racial politics and ethnic privilege underlying the nomination for international film awards.*

**Boo Junfeng** trained in Singapore and Spain before making short films that have screened at Clermont Ferrand and Berlin Film Festivals. His first feature film, *Sandcastle*, premiered at 2010 Cannes Critics' Week. He directed the short *Parting* for omnibus *7 Letters*, which premiered at 2015 Busan International Film Festival. *Apprentice*, his second feature film, premiered at 2016 Cannes Un Certain Regard and screened at 80 festivals around the world, winning prizes in Busan, Fribourg, Taipei Golden Horse and others. Released in the United Kingdom by Arrow Films, it was Singapore's 2016 official entry for the Academy Awards Best Foreign Language Film category. He is also a key organizer of the annual Singapore LGBT rally, Pink Dot SG and is currently preparing for his next feature, *Dominion* (working title).<sup>1</sup>

Interview dates: 21 December 2015 and 21 August 2018<sup>2</sup>

**How Wee Ng (HWN):** *In the past two decades or so, we have seen an emergence of numerous directors, including a handful who have received nominations and awards from FIPRESCI, NETPAC and in prestigious festivals such as the Cannes Film Festival and the Taipei Golden Horse Awards and Film Festival, including yourself. Do you think it is now possible to speak of a Singapore 'new wave'? What does 'new wave' mean to you in the first place?*

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<sup>1</sup> The working title has been changed to *Trinity* in 2019 (personal communication, 17 February 2020).

**Boo Junfeng (BJ):** There are many new filmmaking voices in Singapore who have been making short films over the past decade and are now starting to make their feature films. Some of them have done very well at the film festival circuit and there will be more to come. I can only say that these are interesting voices, and we inspire one another in the work that we do. Whether or not it amounts to a 'new wave' isn't for me to define.

*HWN: Yet funding is one of the most important factors that makes the creation of cinema possible. Directors like Royston Tan and Anthony Chen have applied for seed funding from the Taipei Golden Horse Academy. Have you ever applied to join the Academy or applied for seed funding from them?*

**BJ:** Not for my first two films, as there hasn't really been an opportunity. I went to Busan for the project market there for *Sandcastle*, which was my first film. The film budget we were going for then was financed by the Singapore government and Fortissimo Films, so there wasn't really a need to look for more sources of funding. My second film, *Apprentice* was mostly a Malay language film, so the project market at Golden Horse was not a natural choice. In fact, it's already a five-country co-production and we had most of the resources we needed, and at the same time, it isn't a Chinese language film. It is a Malay and English film with a little bit of Chinese here and there. Also, the two main characters in *Apprentice* are not Chinese. When you look at it from a market potential point of view, GHA wasn't something we immediately considered, because it catered mostly to projects that appealed to the Chinese market. My third film *Dominion* will most likely be a Chinese-language film, that's why we will consider applying.

*HWN: Closely related to GHA is Taiwan cinema. Several Singapore film directors have pointed to Taiwanese directors as their source of inspiration. How would you describe*

*your own relationship with Taiwan cinema, and could you tell us about your mentorship with Hou Hsiao-hsien?*

**BJ:** I am inspired by the works of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, but I don't think I'm alone in my appreciation of their films. Many filmmakers in the region count these Taiwanese masters as their filmmaking heroes as well. My session with Hou was in Busan back in 2005. It was the first Asian Film Academy and I was nominated to participate in it and I went. And Hou Hsiao-hsien was the dean of the programme. For me, it was one of the most enlightening experiences as a young filmmaker at that time. I got to understand his philosophies in filmmaking, something I haven't had the chance to be acquainted with until that point in time.

***HWN:** Did you apply for the Asian Film Academy under the knowledge that Hou was going to be there?*

**BJ:** No, at that time I wasn't even very acquainted with Asian cinema in general. The film school I studied at in Singapore had a curriculum that was rather American-centric. We did have classes on Asian cinema, but it tends to be seen from a Western gaze, and comparisons were often made with how filmmaking in west, mostly America, as a point of reference. For example, the films of Ozu were often used as examples of how filmic language established in the west were challenged. 'Conventional filmmaking' always referred to the standards established in Hollywood. Things like the 180-degree rule, where in filming a conversation, we are taught not to cross the line between two characters, so that the screen direction of the subjects remained opposite of one another. Ozu did not always follow these rules and it was therefore deemed 'unorthodox'.

When I went to Busan, I got to learn from someone like Hou himself what cinema was to him, and it was not seen through the lens of a western curriculum, but from the master himself. It was an opportunity to see a very different understanding of filmmaking, how a story can be told, how actors can be directed, how non-actors can be directed. And that gave me a much more sophisticated understanding of what cinema is or can be. I think my short films after that were quite significantly affected by what I had learnt at Busan.

*HWN: Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang are not only associated with GHA, but they have also won many big awards in international film festivals, such as the 'Big Three', namely Berlin, Venice and Cannes. Might their achievements in these festivals have inspired you to pay them more attention?*

**BJ:** Yes, I think if you are suggesting that I regard these film festivals more highly, that's the case. Because these festivals are mainly international, you are competing on a global stage, as opposed to an ethnocentric stage. That makes a difference. Many of the films and filmmakers that get selected there are ones that I deeply admire. Therefore, to be selected at Cannes Un Certain Regard, and knowing that Hirokazu Kore-eda's film was in the same selection as my film was a huge validation of my work. However, for the mainstream public in Singapore, it could be a different story. Because of the GHA's standing in regional pop culture, a win or a nomination at the GHA would likely get more attention than being selected at the 'Big Three' as you put it. If you look at *Ilo Ilo*, when it won the Camera D'or, it is a huge deal, made the news here but did not create a big enough impact for people to want to go to the cinema to watch the film. But when it won the GHA, suddenly it is massive news and catapulted the film into mainstream

consciousness in Singapore. People became a lot more curious about the film than when it won at Cannes and it was a huge boost to the film's box office takings. GHA is a lot more known, and it is associated with cinema and popular culture of the Chinese regions. Its impact is a lot bigger in the mainstream consciousness in Singapore. If I win a GHA, my parents will be crazy proud, probably prouder than if I won a Cannes award, despite its higher prestige.

*HWN: You seem to suggest that there is a certain exclusive prestige which GHA symbolizes. Could you talk about this a little more?*

**BJ:** I always found it interesting what GHA stands for, it stands for Chinese cinema, and it's natural for such awards to exist to carve out a space from the Hollywood-dominant marketplace. It is very much about protecting a space for films that are of Chinese culture, language, industry that is trying to find its audience in a Hollywood-dominated world. That applies to the different kinds of smaller cinemas, you have similar movements for French films, Jewish films, so on and so forth, each trying to protect a space for different cultural iterations of cinema. And although Chinese-language cinema has been a relatively small player in the global industry, things are changing very quickly. I'm curious how things will evolve, when the Chinese industry becomes a major player.

But it is also interesting to note how ethnocentric the GHA is. I mean, take for example, we were considering whether *Apprentice* will be considered for GHA. Just like any film would consider the kinds of film festivals and awards that are available.

According to GHA rules and regulations, for a film to be eligible for nomination, five of its key creative members, apart from the director, need to be ethnic Chinese, or of Chinese descent. As a co-production, we had personnel of different nationalities for

*Apprentice*. Therefore it did not qualify because we were just short of one ethnic-Chinese person in the creative team.

*HWN: So what you're saying is that if Apprentice did qualify, you would have submitted it for GHA nomination?*

**BJ:** Yes, we would have but we couldn't. We did make the calculations but we didn't meet the criteria. But in doing this exercise of identifying who is Chinese among the crew and cast, it made me a little uncomfortable. As a Singaporean Chinese, with the Chinese being the majority in a multi-racial society, we are already enjoying the privilege of being the ethnic majority. Where racial politics is concerned here, we try to consider minority representation for fairness, so what about Malays? What about Indians? If you are progressive-minded, privilege guilt often comes into play when you are making decisions, and you'd consider how ethnic minorities should be represented in your workplace, or in the organization that you lead. And I was just thinking what usually justifies a cultural programme that is ethnocentric? In most parts of the world, the Chinese would be a minority, carving such a space makes sense in a place that is white-dominated or Hollywood-dominated. But in Singapore, the space is mostly Chinese. Therefore when a qualifying criterion is that there are enough members who are of the descent of the majority race, it just did not sound right in the Singapore context. Therefore, it felt very awkward trying to sieve out who's non-Chinese in order to try and qualify for the awards. Because it [GHA] is framed in a Chinese-centric way, and in Singapore's terms, it makes it majority-centric. Maybe I'm overthinking it. It felt a bit uncomfortable going through who is Chinese and who's not.



*HWN: So what does it mean to be carving out a minority space in the context of Hollywood?*

**BJ:** Quite often it is about carving out a cultural space, sometimes a political space for a minority. And in this case where cinema is concerned, the powers-that-be would be Hollywood, and this small cultural space that GHA is carving out is for the Chinese-language for ethnic Chinese audiences and filmmakers. With the shifting dynamics of the world, if you consider this 50 years later, when or if Chinese cinema and its makers become bigger, more dominant players, how will GHA remain relevant? When the powers shift, what role will GHA play? Can you imagine if the Hollywood [Oscars nomination] criteria required at least 5 white people in the creative team in order to qualify, that sounds extremely racist and problematic and it is privileging a privileged group of people. With Chinese companies buying Hollywood studios, I think it's a matter of time. Perhaps in time to come, the GHA will consider championing independent films and films with fresher voices instead. Or perhaps there should be other ways of defining what this Chinese-language film industry is, rather than one that is defined by race.

*HWN: In other words, context is crucial for understanding privilege, and you were also talking about racial politics in Singapore. Care to elaborate a little more?*

**BJ:** As a Singaporean, it makes me more aware. Being Chinese in Singapore doesn't make you the underdog because you're the majority and therefore it is a privilege and it makes me more aware of the ethnocentric dynamics favouring Chinese. In the Singapore context, it makes it alienating for minorities here.

*HWN: Did this understanding inform your motivation for the making of *Apprentice*?*

**BJ:** Not really. That was really colour-blind casting and I just wanted actors who had the most chemistry and the main characters ended up being two Malay men. And as a result of that, it will not qualify for the GHA.

*HWN: Other than GHA, there are currently two other major Chinese film awards, namely HKFA and GRA. How do you view these two awards? And if GRA extends funding availability to Singapore directors, would you consider, and why?*

**BJ:** I would focus on discussing GHA as I am more familiar with it as compared to the other two. Ask any filmmaker, if any fund is available to him or her, they will of course consider it. Because it is money and it is eligibility – of course I will consider it, depending on the spending criteria. Usually when you are awarded a fund anywhere in the world, there will be strings attached, so for example, you need to spend a certain percentage in the country that gave you the money. Usually those would be the biggest considerations, because sometimes it doesn't make sense to spread it across so many countries. And sometimes the cost of doing something just does not justify applying for the funds in order to pay that much more. But that usually applies to expenses in Europe, where things tend to be more expensive than in Asia. So, yes, if something is made available, of course.

*HWN: Could you tell us about Apprentice's NETPAC win at the Golden Horse Film Festival? What was it like?*

**BJ:** Yes, it selected at the Golden Horse Film Festival, which is open to all kinds of films. It won the NETPAC award at the film festival in 2016, and we are very grateful for that. The NETPAC award at the Golden Horse Film Festival I guess can be considered the only award related to Golden Horse that a non-Chinese film can qualify for, though it

isn't within the ambit of the Golden Horse Awards, which are perceived as the highest honour in Chinese-language cinema.

*HWN: What are the implications of a Singapore International Film Festival award as opposed to winning a GHA?*

**BJ:** GHA has a much bigger market, it is a lot more known, and it is highly regarded in the Chinese-speaking world. The industries and markets involved with that award are also vastly different from SGIFF's. In Singapore, the Silver Screen Awards of the SGIFF is known mostly to Southeast Asian filmmakers who frequent the film festival circuit. Awareness of it in the mainstream public is not quite there yet, though there is a lot of potential.

*HWN: You do not mean to say that a stronger focus on Southeast Asia implies more limitations when it comes to global market coverage, do you?*

**BJ:** I don't think it's a limitation. In fact, it is the opposite. Southeast Asian cinema is a lot more diverse, way more diverse than Chinese cinema, even if you included all the different [Chinese-speaking] territories. Because of the former's diversity, there isn't a singular cultural reference or a more monocultural space. The Taiwanese, Hong Kong and PRC actors and directors whose names are very well-known in the Chinese world, will be known among the majority of Singaporeans. You will make the news a lot more and you will be associated with this pop culture and cinematic culture of Chinese-centric cinema if you win or get a nomination at the GHA. Whereas if you win something that is Southeast Asian, the impression it leaves in mainstream consciousness is unfortunately less significant. But I think the SGIFF is doing good work in upping the significance of its awards, so things may change.

***HWN:** It's interesting that we've mentioned about the ethnocentrism of GHA quite a few times. Many Singapore Chinese directors work on Chinese-related themes. Yet you come across as a versatile director who has been worked on diverse themes, such as Singapore history, homosexuality, memory and have even gone on to make a Malay-language film dealing with the ethics of capital punishment. Would you agree that your versatility is what makes you different from other directors?*

**BJ:** I can't speak for other filmmakers and I can't really make a comparison. For me, the starting point, which is also the case for most other filmmakers too, what are the issues that matter to them, such that they would want to spend 3, 4 to 5 years of their lives working on a project that is related to it? Often, it's a very long-drawn process. I carefully consider what I want to say or make in order to address the themes, in that sense, for example *Apprentice*, I had to find ways for myself to be able to relate, even though I care about the issues. I may not necessarily be able to write a human story that is credible, that speaks of that reality, some of these people live in. I find it very inspiring, while researching some of these issues for a film I want to make, I also go through a certain process of emotional research, whereby it is not about the facts, it is about certain emotional truths, a certain reality that I want to be able to put across. So that has always been my starting point. *Apprentice* involved subject matter that had a lot of red tape.

***HWN:** On that regard, would you be able to tell us about some of the bureaucratic hurdles you had to deal with in the process of making *Apprentice*?*

**BJ:** We were careful when we were applying for government funding for the film. We were hoping the film would get funded even with its subject matter, so we made sure it had good backing from funds in Hong Kong, France and Germany before we approached

the Singapore Film Commission for funding. To their credit, they funded the film with all the schemes that were available for us to apply for. The SFC even selected *Apprentice* as Singapore's official entry to the Oscars' Best Foreign Language Film category. The only hurdle we faced from the authorities was the Mature 18 rating it received when the film was released in Singapore. It was a restrictive rating which limited the reach of the film.

*HWN: Anything else you might want to add?*

**BJ:** As filmmakers in an Asian, multicultural, immigrant society whose common language is English, questions of identity – whose voice do we represent, which audience are we thinking of – are inherently very complex. The layers we have to work through are both a challenge and fodder for inspiration.

## Note

1. The first interview was conducted in person at a cafe in Bugis, Singapore and the second was via email correspondence. The two interviews have been edited and combined into one to reflect the updated developments in Boo's filmmaking career alongside the issues and concerns which have arisen as a result.

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