

Article  
Philip Cheah  
**Cinema of Singapore 2019**



A Land Imagined

As tiny red dots go, Singapore is as small as they come. When the question of the film industry comes up, most of us would scratch our heads and then would only be able to name one local filmmaker (ie. Jack Neo) who has had box office power for the last decade. Most Singapore films either don't get released or disappear quickly in the box office shuffle. But when it comes to the subject of awards, we fare better than in the Olympic's gold medal tally. Two significant awards were won in 2018. Singapore opened last year with a big bang at the Sundance Film Festival with Sandi Tan's *Shirkers*. The film won Best Director in the World Documentary section. Then later in the year, Chris Yeo stepped up to win the Golden Leopard for Best Film with *A Land Imagined*, at Locarno International Film Festival.

Both were quirky outings. *Shirkers* was a 25-year reconstruction of what happened to a feature film that Sandi Tan wrote and starred in during her teenage years in 1992. Had it been released at that time, it would have gone down in history as Singapore's first modern independent feature and might have even changed the face and direction of Singapore film. Tan's universe was decidedly quirky with clear pop cultural references to comics and music. It's the obvious predecessor to Terry Zwickoff's *Ghost World* but the latter was only made in 2001! It was so zany that it would have flown Singapore's freak flag loud and proud, and would have been much, much harder to co-opt into the mainstream than most Singapore indies today. Shot in 135 locations on a budget of SGD\$ 400,000, the film, about the paradox of killing those you love; mysteriously

disappeared with the director, Georges Cardona. Following his death, 70 cans of 16mm mysteriously reappeared via Cardona's widow. *Shirkers* brings it all back home through memories of cast and crew revisiting the impossibility of making this film. More important perhaps is the realisation that quirky talents still fly below Singapore's funding radar. The film, in its second incarnation, still did not find official Singapore funding. But as Tan says in the film: 'When I was 18, I had the idea that you found freedom by building worlds inside your head.'

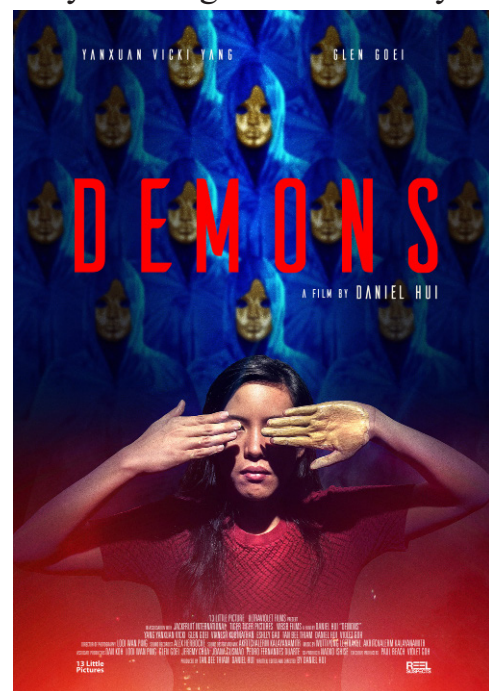


Shirkers

For that similar reason, Chris Yeo's *A Land Imagined* had to embrace magic realism in order to reveal Singapore's fantastic reality. Again like *Shirkers*, Yeo's film takes the form of a mystery, a disappearance and possible death of a China migrant worker and a Bangladeshi labourer on a land reclamation site. The site itself is rich in symbolic history, the fact that it was the large Chinese immigrant community that took over Singapore after its founding by the British in 1819, and that South Asians, who were recruited in the late 1970s due to a tight labour market, became a significant part of foreign labourers today.

Space, and the need for more of it, has always been an obsession for this tiny dot of a coun-

try. Land reclamation, to increase the country's landmass, has become such a contentious issue that Singapore has been seen as contributing to Cambodia's environmental problems due to its huge sand imports. Cambodia has banned sand exports to Singapore since 2017. By offering a tangential portrayal of reality, Yeo re-creates the shock and awe Singaporeans sometimes feel about their country that only exists in their imagination. Or as Tan said, '...by building worlds inside your head.'



Demons

While *Shirkers* was bought by Netflix and released non-theatrically last year, *A Land Imagined* was only released in February this year. However, the latter film did succeed in securing official funding for its production, perhaps due to producer Fran Borgia's previous track record of films selected by Cannes. *A Land Imagined's* film editor, Daniel Hui, directed his third feature, *Demons*, that was shown in Busan International Film Festival last year. Again like *A Land Imagined*, magic realism pervades the film. This time it's the

relationship between an abusive theatre director and his actress. You can bill this one as psycho-horror and there are enough gruesome, creepy scenes to turn a genteel art house audience away. This, it managed to do at the Berlinale where there were about 10 per cent of walkouts at each screening. It's easy to read this film as the dynamic between actress and director since the filmmaker's own name is transposed onto the protagonist. In addition,



Republic of Food

the filmmaker himself acts as the protagonist's lover. The doubling that exists in the film puts forward the notion that Singapore is a great place to find your evil twin! If you take it one step further, the actress-director dynamic is really political, that of the power relations between people and the leader. The irony is doubly delicious if you realise that Glen Goei, who portrays the director in *Demons*, was the filmmaker of *The Blue Mansion* (2009), an allegorical tale of Singapore's ruling party's leader's family. In a sense, he reprises the role

he never got to play in his own film, in a tour de force performance here.



23.59 The Haunting Hour

Subtexts abound in Singapore cinema causing foreign and local reviews to exist on different planets. However, while there is so much unsaid (or left silent to taunt you) in public interviews and reviews, it has led to a kind of professional trainspotting for those of us who have sat through these films all these years. The above three titles are of particular note because of their pedigree. For example, while *Shirkers* is a loving paean to Singapore in the 90s, the director is now listed as a 'Singapore-born US filmmaker'. Not only does Daniel Hui edit Chris Yeo's film, they are part of an independent collective, 13 Little Pictures, several members of whom also appear in *Demons*. They form a filmmaking vanguard that is apart from the Singapore mainstream.

Altogether, about nine films were released theatrically last year including Jack Neo's Wonderful *Liang Xi Mei*, with a gross of SGD\$1.7 million at the box office. Other films were Eric Khoo's *Ramen Teh*, about a Japanese chef fusing the Singapore pork ribs soup (known locally as 'bak kut the') with the Japanese noodle (or ramen). The quest is also one of family as his late mother was Singaporean. Japanese film director Takumi Saitoh plays the chef with a striking guest role by veteran superstar

Seiko Matsuda. Singapore's reputation and obsession with food plays out again in Kelvin Tong's comedy, *Republic of Food*. In the dystopian future, the eating of unprocessed food is banned due to a global food-borne virus. But in Singapore, an underground food club still cooks up a storm until it gets busted. Jacen Tan's *Zombiepura* tries to follow both the success of Korea's *Train to Busan* (2016) and the Jack Neo army comedies, *Ah Boys to Men* (that is about to enter its fifth sequel), with an army camp infected by a zombie virus. Meanwhile Gilbert Chan returns with a sequel to *23:59* (2011) with *23:59: The Haunting Hour*. More of the same with army and horror and a tagline that reads: 'No army is safe from hell.'



Buffalo Boys

Mike Wiluan's directing debut, *Buffalo Boys* was Singapore's entry to the Academy Awards for the Foreign Language Film Category this year. Many pundits were caught off-guard as the film came across as an Indonesian film, a cowboy western filmed during colonial-era Indonesia. Filmed on a budget of SGD\$4 million, Wiluan said: 'People don't make westerns in this part of the world. I wanted to see how I can make an interesting story that makes sense so I used Indonesian history and filled it

with interesting facts about colonialism.'

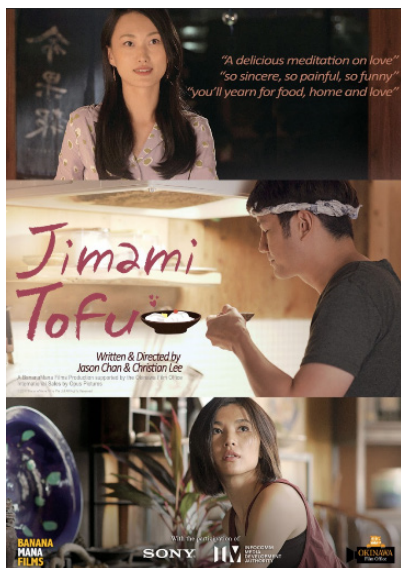


A Simple Wedding

More traditional fare came from Lee Thean Jeen's *A Simple Wedding*, that follows the trials and tribulations of a young couple and Raymond Tan's *Wayang Kids*, a children's comedy stressing intercultural harmony. It is no wonder that the film received funding from the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism. The recent concern for cross-cultural regionalism reared its pointed head with the arrival of the Southeast Asian film fund. Administered by the Singapore Film Commission, the fund will support up to SGD\$250,000 per film that is produced and developed by Singaporean producers with Southeast Asian partners. Perhaps this was why *Buffalo Boys* was chosen as Singapore's bid for the Oscars.

While Singapore's per capita cinema attendance remains the highest in the world at 19 million, it's a known fact that there has been a decline in the total figure, from 22 million in 2016 to 19 million in 2017. Yet more cinema

halls are being built. Eagle Wings, a new independent exhibitor, entered the market with a cineplex of two premium and two standard halls late last year. This brings up the number of screens from 257 to 261 and the number of exhibitors with more than one hall to eight.



Jimami Tofu

This persistence of vision is also apparent in a number of self-funded independent films. Most intriguing of all is *Konpaku* (Soul) by Remi M Sali, a young filmmaker who began with short films in 1995 (after Sandi Tan). Still with his filmmaking partner, Dzulkifli Sungit, who helms cinematography, Sali's film is an in-your-face politically incorrect film about the Malay minority in Singapore. Based on true events of an Islamic exorcism, the film is a love story between a man and a female spirit. You can call it an update of the Ponti-

anak (female vampire) films from the 1950s, as *Konpaku* engages the social phenomenon of mixed-race marriages today. In this case, the female spirit happens to be Japanese, and she happens to be a very raunchy spirit (and if you ever wanted to know, "iku iku" in Japanese means "I'm coming"). Unlike other Singapore horror films, *Konpaku* wears its cultural badge proudly. Can you imagine that much of the dialogue is a perennial debate with the ghost about marriage and the necessity for Islamic conversion?

Finally, Jason Chan and Christian Lee's *Jimami Tofu* is the global borderless future. Both are Singapore permanent residents with the former hailing from Australia and the latter from the US. Their company BananaMana Films is Singapore-based and their audience award-winning (at Hawaii IFF 2017) *Jimami Tofu* features a Singaporean chef (played by Chan). But the film was largely shot in Okinawa with a Japanese cast. The film's title refers to an Okinawan dish with the story focused on a chef in love with a Japanese food critic, and his challenge to cross cultural boundaries by tackling an alien cuisine. Is this a Singapore film? Who knows and who cares? Crazy Rich Asians could even be this film's evil twin!

---

*Mr. Philip Cheah is a film critic and is the editor of BigO, Singapore's only independent pop culture publication.*