

Acropolis Cinema presents



Huang Hsin-yao's  
**THE GREAT BUDDHA+**

February 6, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

# ABOUT THE FILM

Underlining the gap between have-nots' life and elites' world by switching between black and white and glamorous colors, *The Great Buddha+* vividly illustrates a corrupted village in rural southern Taiwan with memorable style, heartfelt empathy, and whimsical humor.

Security guard Pickle and his trash collector friend Belly Button kill time together in night shifts watching the American-educated boss's dash-cam recordings of his sexual encounters with numerous women. Against the buddies' will, something horrifying rather than erotic reveals. (Cheng Cheng Films)

102 min // Taiwan // 2017

## **A Profile of Director Huang Hsin-yao by Edmund Lee**

*The following article was originally published by the South China Morning Post*

As soon as Huang Hsin-yao was given the go-ahead to make his first fiction feature, the Taiwanese documentary filmmaker was already thinking to himself how his project – a predominantly black-and-white film with two little-known actors as leads – would do little business at the box office and be admired by few people. And vice versa cinema is basically a fixed relation, and also an authoritarian one where everything that could disrupt the presentation will be on the screen exclusively. This is a convention I am fine with as long as it is stated. When you go see a movie in a theater you don't mind being in it, you know you'll be held hostage and that your judgment should come at the end.

"I thought it could be considered a job very well done if the film would receive a bit of attention at some film festivals," Huang tells the *Post* in a recent interview. "To see the film achieve what it has done to this point – I couldn't have imagined any of that from the beginning."

Two weeks after it opened the Taipei Film Festival in late June to the surprised delight of many ("very few people had watched the film before that point"), *The Great Buddha+* became the festival's biggest winner, taking home five awards that included the Grand Prize and the best narrative feature accolade.

But the real shock came in October, when Huang's film became the front-runner in the race for the prestigious Golden Horse Awards with 10 nominations – the most for any film this year. A month later, *The Great Buddha+* came out on top in five categories, winning the best new director and best adapted screenplay awards for Huang.

"I have to thank all the people who have helped me along the way," the 44-year-old filmmaker says in his typically gentle tone. "I feel a little bit more confident about myself now."

It is sometimes hard to determine if Huang is being tongue in cheek. Here is a director who's well known for the sarcastic tone he adopts in the voice-over commentaries for some of his documentaries, and he has carried that over to his fiction feature debut.

The dry humour he lends *The Great Buddha+* with his narration is one of the film's most distinguished components.

A relentlessly bleak view on the daily life of people on the fringes of Taiwanese society, the film follows two underclass losers – Pickle (Cres Chuang I-tseng), a night security guard at a bronze statue factory, and his best pal Belly Button (Bamboo Chen Chu-sheng), a recyclables collector – as they inadvertently stumble upon the sinister secrets of Pickle's wealthy boss (Leon Dai Li-ren).

All three of these characters also appeared in Huang's *The Great Buddha* (2014), the acclaimed 23-minute short film on which the writer-director based his new full-length feature – thus the "adapted screenplay" category *The Great Buddha+* was put in at the Golden Horse Awards, even though the script for a 40-minute version of the film already existed when the short was made.

"These characters are composites of several people that I know, that I have met, or that I have once saw," says Huang, who reveals his narrative film influences include the directors Takeshi Kitano, Werner Herzog, Aki Kaurismäki, Roy Andersson and Bela Tarr, but also stresses that his screenwriting process is "simple", and that he doesn't especially have a "favourite" filmmaker.

Instead, Huang was far more influenced by the social movements that took place in Taiwan in 2013 and 2014, when many people participated and it became a trend. "A lot of people were discussing that on Facebook," he recalls. "Then a voice started to call out people who weren't joining the movements. It got to a point where those who didn't come out were made to feel ashamed of themselves."

That kept Huang thinking about those who stayed in the margins: either they were of the opposite political view, the director reckons, or they had problems of their own to sort out – and it is this latter strand that Huang decided to delve further into with his story.

"The protagonists in these two films couldn't even hold on to their jobs," he says of *The Great Buddha* and *The Great Buddha+*, "so how could they begin to think about the larger issues? It's my objective to explore this: there are many people in our society who are so oppressed by their livelihood that they can't afford to think about the future."

While his film is often classified as a dark comedy, poetically blending scenes of biting satire with those of heartbreaking poignancy, Huang says the feeling of not having a future is reflective of the mood of Taiwan in "not just the past few years, but for quite a long time".

"Life is filled with obstacles, and these characters could only laugh at themselves to pass the days," he explains. "If the film comes across as being funny, it's not my intention. Rather, this is just the way they deal with the hardship of their daily life."

"I put stories around me into the film," Huang continues. "The films from the 'New Taiwanese Cinema' movement in the 1980s would look at those people, but they have almost completely vanished from the screens after that. I don't know why, but I find these people's life stories really remarkable, and I want to tell their stories."

Huang believes his recent haul of awards should help him get his next projects off the ground more easily. "When I made the short film", he says of *The Great Buddha*, "I thought maybe it would be another three to five years before I would find out if I had a chance to turn it into a full-length feature. I was lucky to have met my two producers and got the opportunity earlier."

Anyone who has watched *The Great Buddha+* would remember the hilariously deadpan tone with which Huang thanks his producers, Chung Mong-hong (the *Godspeed* director who lent Huang his regular cast and crew, and handled the film's cinematography) and Yeh Ju-feng (producer of *Our Times*), during its opening credits. Huang even followed *Godspeed's* production to get acquainted with the team.

The filmmaker is, however, less certain if his focus will shift from documentaries now that his fiction feature debut has proved a big hit. As we speak, Huang is making two documentaries concurrently: one is about the hydropower system in Taichung City, and the other, made for public television, gives the filmmaker a chance to show "the real face of Taiwan" that is neglected by more touristy programmes.

As for his next fiction film, Huang is considering whether to tell the stories of white-collar workers, "whose lives are not necessarily happier than people at the bottom of society," he says. "I'm thinking whether to make a film about this – or should I tell a story about the current state of Taiwan?"

For now, Huang is happy to keep his options open. "I'm still not very sure about how I'll allocate my work time," he says. "But a fiction film may take two years [to get the green light], so I think I can still keep making documentaries. I don't see any big contradictions between making documentaries and fiction films." ♦

### **Upcoming Acropolis screenings:**

**-Feb. 27: *El mar la mar* (Joshua Bonnetta and J.P. Sniadecki, 2017)—  
Downtown Independent**



@AcropolisCinema



/AcropolisCinema



AcropolisCinema@gmail.com

**[www.acropoliscinema.com](http://www.acropoliscinema.com)**