

Interview: Director Huaug Hsin-yao on 'The Great Buddha +' at Chicago's Asian Pop-Up Cinema

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CHICAGO – Season Six is one of the most successful for Chicago's Asian Pop-Up Cinema (APUC), as they present gems from the Asian film world that provide mind and cultural expansion. Recently, as part of their Taiwan Cinema Days, APUC brought in director Huang Hsin-yao of "The Great Buddha +," a meditation on class, religion and the ever present eye-in-the-sky video of the current era.

"The Great Buddha +" (the "+" sign is a mischievous wink at the film's beginnings as a short) focuses on a life survivor named Belly Button, who collects recyclables for a living and uses his free time to hang with Pickle, the night guard at a statue factory that specializes in images of the Buddha. The factory CEO is Kevin, who specializes in having sex with as many women as possible. He also has a dash camera in his Mercedes, which Belly Button and Pickle infiltrate to indulge in the footage, but one video tells them more than they wanted to know. In addition, director Huang Hsin-yao narrates the film as it unfolds, another wink of satire in his story structure.



Pickle (Cres Chaung, left) and Belly Button (Bamboo Chen) in 'The Great Buddha +'

Photo credit: [AsianPopUpCinema.org](#)

Season Six of the Asian Pop-Up Cinema features a diverse line-up of films, with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, India and Hong Kong all represented for the Spring of 2018, all with English subtitles. Screenings occur at the AMC River East 21 in downtown Chicago, with other

various locations for special events and a number of free screenings. APUC is curated by veteran film programmer Sophia Wong Boccio. Upcoming films in the series include...

A VILLAGE DOCTOR'S CHOICE (China) Saturday, April 14, 2018... Directed by Zhou Yu-Pan, this a free screening co-sponsored by the Chicago Chinese Consulate. [Click here](#) [22] for details, screening venue and seat reservations.

VILLAGE ROCKSTARS (India) Wednesday, April 18th, 2018... Director Rima Das will appear on behalf of the film. [Click here](#) [23] for details.

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to director Huaug Hsin-yao on themes in "The Great Buddha +," through an interpreter.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are definitely commenting on human motivations versus religious expectations. What were you ultimately saying about man's relationship with religion in 'The Great Buddha +'?

Huaug Hsin-yao: I'm not talking specifically about religion, I'm using the Buddha as a symbol for humans regulating themselves in society. My question in the film is 'what is the ultimate moral rule?' There is no expectation for wrongdoing from religion, what becomes wrong is the human relationships and human interactions.

HollywoodChicago.com: The names of the lower class characters... Belly Button, Pickle, Sugar Apple, Peanut are meant to give them less status, while the authority characters all have full names. What were you trying to get the audience to understand in naming characters this way?

Huaug Hsin-yao: Those were characters nicknames, which were based on what their occupations were, and made them easier to ignore as human beings. But if you take the nickname Pickle, you can choose to have a pickle with a meal or not, it's just a side item. But if you do have it, it does change the taste or of the meal. A 'belly button' is not a useful body part, except when we're in the womb.... during that time it is our vital life connection. In that way, the nicknames meant something.



Human Sin-sation in 'The Great Buddha +'

Photo credit: AsianPopUpCinema.org

HollywoodChicago.com: Sex is a motivating theme in the film, both for Kevin and Belly Button. Who has a healthier attitude toward sex between those two characters, and why?

Huaug Hsin-yao: When it comes to sex, I have no judgement on what is a 'healthy attitude.' [laughs] Sex is necessary for life, but the character of Kevin overdoes it, and it just becomes an expression of exploitation, wealth and power. With Belly Button and Pickle, their voyeuristic tendencies make sex very narrow for them... it only exists in pornography and their imaginations.

HollywoodChicago.com: The black and white cinematography is gorgeous. What adjustments did producer/cinematographer Chung Mong-Hong make to the digital platform to create your vision, and what black&white films did you study to get your particular look?

Huaug Hsin-yao: The film was shot in color, and was adjusted afterward, but while I was on the set, the playback monitor was only in black and white. I didn't have a specific set of films as influence, but I do respect the work of Bela Tarr, a Hungarian director known for 'Werchmeister Harmoniak.'

HollywoodChicago.com: So what was behind the decision in the use of color in the film, as to where you used it?

Huaug Hsin-yao: The short film version of this film, 'The Great Buddha,' was underfunded, so the use of black and white was a way to make it more realistic... the settings we were using didn't look authentic in color. When I extended the film to feature length, I knew I wanted to keep the black and white, but the challenge was how to use the color in the film.

That's why the dash cam footage is in color, it became something that was mysterious, and that was what Chung Mong-Hong brought to the table. Black and white was the authentic life, and the voyeuristic footage of the dash cam that Pickle and Belly Button were watching became the fantasy.

HollywoodChicago.com: You show how current digital technology is both our friend and enemy. How do you think constantly filming or being filmed affects human behavior?

Huaug Hsin-yao: The reason we have the dash cam footage in the film is precisely to illustrate how crazy and overdone our recording of images has become. China is developing facial recognition software for all their big cities, which leads to the observation that technology is moving faster than what we as humans can absorb. Technology is constantly moving, and there is no way for a human being to catch up.

In filmmaking previous to the digital age, there was hours spent on set to make sure a shot looked right. Now we don't worry about that on location, we spend time tweaking the footage in post production through the digital tools.



In Chicago: Director Huaug Hsin-yao of 'The Great Buddha +'

Photo credit: AsianPopUpCinema.org

HollywoodChicago.com: Since religion is satirized in your film, what in your experience and culture is true about the the Buddha is a towering symbol for Buddhism?

Huaug Hsin-yao: No matter if it's Western culture and their religions or Eastern culture and religion, it all relates back to my basis for life philosophy, and that is about Taoism. In Taoism, the symbol for tai-chi is a circle, which symbolizes a human relationship with the universe.

In my point of view, religion is just a borrowing of natural rules to guide us on how to relate to the universe. We should respect the earth, and the concept of the universal rules. But instead of that, we have a world that respects a 'Master,' a human being, that interprets these rules through a religion.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who are your filmmaker influences? And what led to your decision to narrate your own fictional film?

Huaug Hsin-yao: I didn't major in film studies during my undergrad years, and really only studied documentary form during my graduate years. In that exposure, I can't really express specific director influences, except to say that my interaction with all of them integrated together in my work and created a catalyst for evolution in the quality of my work. It was the quantity of influences that equaled quality as I went along in the journey.

As far as the narration, I had done my own narration in documentaries that I produced earlier. Producer Chung Mong-Hong thought I should do it for this film, and I was hesitant. But he told me that since was my first narrative film, I should do what I want to do... there are no limitations, so I thought why not narrate.

For a complete overview and schedule of the Asian Pop-Up Cinema series for Season Six, which continues through May 16th, 2018, [click here](#). [24]



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