

The 19th ifva Awards - Asian New Force Category Jury Meeting Transcript

Jury Members: Chan Wai (Chan), Tan Chui-mui (Tan), Arvin Chen (Arvin)

ifva representatives: Teresa Kwong (Kwong), Kattie Fan (Fan)

Kwong: The purpose of today's meeting is to determine the awards for **ifva's** Asian New Force category. **ifva** provides a platform for media artists from Hong Kong and Asia to present their works in Hong Kong and throughout the world. In March each year, we organize the **ifva** short film and visual media festival, with many screening and cultural exchange events. As with many other competitions, we pay attention to a work's content and form, and in addition, we also emphasize two additional criteria, independent spirit and creativity. Independent spirit means that all our entries are independently produced, and are not commissioned shorts or commercial. We hope to be able to gauge the artist's own ideas in their works. Sometimes artists' ideas are too similar to the mainstream, which is not the kind of independent spirit we hope to encourage. This year we have 10 finalists in this category, from which we hope you can select a Gold Award, the winner of which will receive HK\$30,000 in prize money, a Silver Award, the winner of which will receive HK\$20,000, as well as a Special Mention, the winner of which will get a certificate but no prize money. Special Mention recognizes works whose overall standard may not be on the same level as Gold or Silver award, but contain certain aspects you consider excellent, such as actors or script. If there are no questions we can begin by discussing the works one by one.

Tan: I think **Badbug** is very commercial. It is not very strong in the independent spirit and creativity elements that you emphasize, since parts of the story are very similar to commercial films. Also there is the art direction in this film. Short films should be seen as an end in itself, or as a venue for testing if a director is qualified to make feature films?

Kwong: The first consideration is the work itself. Not all our participants hope to make feature films. The other point you mentioned is independent spirit. This year we received over 500 works, and our first round jury chose the 10 finalist out of more than 70 works. Some of these works are drama, some documentaries, and some are experimental, and there is a fairly even distribution. **Badbug** was chosen by Chan Wai.

Chan: I like this work a lot. I paid special attention to the end credits to see what kind of production crew they had. The work's standard and way of expression is rather commercial. Also, it's strange that the things that look good on the small screen is not so good on the big screen. The points that I appreciate on DVD are no longer apparent, and the work seems ordinary.

- Kwong: Independent spirit is seen in the artist's vision and the characteristic of the work. Some works merely try to emulate commercial films, and so is not what we mean by independent spirit. Do you have anything to add about ***Badbug***?
- Arvin: The technical aspect is quite advanced, but the content is not too novel. It is very commercial. Its strongest area is its technique, which is highly sophisticated.
- Kwong: The next work is ***Killing A Pig Without Mao***, which is done by a Chinese student living in France.
- Tan: The idea is good, but I didn't enjoy it, particularly the voiceover.
- Chan: The film was produced in France, and the whole film's tone was a little off.
- Tan: Some parts may be deliberate. The actors are foreigners and the environment is also foreign.
- Chan: I chose this work initially because of the text it's based on, but the results...
- Tan: You chose it because of its idea.
- Chan: Yes.
- Arvin: The idea is quite distinctive. At the beginning the idea is very clear, but then it becomes more blurred. The director tries to infuse the work with stage effects, which does not blend well with the rest of the film. This is a distinctive work that started out well, but collapsed on itself.
- Kwong: The next work is ***See Tiger Together***.
- Tan: The characters are conventional, but the director designed the film well. The style is very much like a student film.
- Chan: He chose to put these two characters together, but not much happens between them. The whole film deals with only one situation.
- Arvin: The part with the male character is interesting, and makes people want to know more about him. Unfortunately this part is not developed well.
- Tan: The monologue is not designed well, and the actors are performing according to their own interpretations.
- Kwong: The next work is also from China, ***The Poet and Singer***.

- Tan: At first I thought the film a bit crude, and I only got into it halfway through. The film captures the sense of male camaraderie that only indie films can.
- Chan: The first time I viewed it, I did not get into the story at all. When I got to the scene when the old man grabs the lead character's hand, I rewound and watched the film again. It has a sense of crudeness and pretentiousness unique to Chinese independent films.
- Tan: The voice-over in the first scene is a bit too much. However, I grew to like this film because its story is layered and presents many different contrasts.
- Arvin: I quite like this film. I also had trouble engaging with the work at first, and then I just gave up. I no longer cared about the storyline, and just paid attention to the dialogue and images, which are interesting. The scene where he sings is marvelous. Its way of expression is quite unique and shows a sense of self confidence.
- Kwong: The next work is ***The Questioning***.
- Tan: I'm good friends with the director, and have seen his other works. This is a genre unique to Chinese independent underground filmmakers like Ai Wei Wei. It is not something designed by the director, but rather, the filmmakers carry around cameras with them at all times and record things that happen with them. These people have been followed by the police. Their artwork can be seen as a part of their lives.
- Chan: His life and work are one and the same.
- Arvin: I enjoyed it. But can this be seen as artistic creation?
- Tan: We can discuss later how to define artistic creation.
- Arvin: At first I thought this was a drama.
- Kwong: This category is called Asian New Force, and we have entries from all over Asia including Iraq and Israel. It is a coincidence that there are so many Chinese films among the finalists. The next one is also from China, called ***Butter Lamp***.
- Tan: I think only a very confident director is capable of making a film like this. The director knows exactly how his film should take shape. There are many good moments in this film, and it feels very complete to me.
- Arvin: I agree.

- Kwong: The next film is from Singapore, ***When the Cold Wind Blows***.
- Tan: I find this film hard to bear, perhaps because it feels too designed. Even though it looks at things from a Singaporean perspective, there is not much substance to it. I feel the director has much to say but cannot express it well.
- Arvin: I know this director, so my opinion may not be very objective. He strives too hard for a cinematic atmosphere, but the story is not rich enough to support it. He filmed many scenes with the protagonists walking around in the streets, which is reminiscent of ***Before Sunset***, but the drama is a bit weak.
- Chan: The beginning of the film is a little dull, and the story seems to be about a very ordinary couple. The director turns a story that seems very dramatic on the outside into something personal. I'm not familiar with the situation in Taiwan, so I didn't understand parts of the film. In the end, the lead character has to leave, but the film does not clearly explain his situation, which is a big problem.
- Kwong: If there is nothing to add, let's move on to the next work, ***Dreams in the Depths***.
- Arvin: He allows the audience to get a sense of that part of the world with just one location, which is quite impressive.
- Chan: This work embodies the quality of creativity that we stress in this competition. Is the work directed by an Iranian?
- Kwong: The film's language is Persian, but I'm not sure about the exact production background.
- Tan: This is a very complete film. Every aspect, including character design, dialogue and mise-en-scene are very good.
- Arvin: From the underground tunnel, one can sense what the outside world is like.
- Tan: I'm not sure about the political situation, but I'm worried that it is a bit contrived.
- Chan: Things like this have happened in real life. I think this film is very powerful, with all the action focused on one situation.
- Kwong: The next film is ***The Busy Young Psychic***.
- Tan: I am a bit sensitive about recent Taiwanese films, like ***On the Air***, which feels like a promotional film for the Taiwan dialect. I don't know if it's because they consider Taiwanese culture under threat, and sense a strong need to protect it, but these films feel strange. They do not have what I consider to be independent

spirit, since they are very similar to a lot of other new Taiwanese films. I can't judge these films that emphasize indigenous Taiwan cultures very objectively. Of the two films, I like *The Busy Young Psychic* more.

Chan: We can discuss the two Taiwanese films together. When watching *On the Air*, I did not care whether or not it is a film that emphasizes indigenous culture. Rather, I paid attention to the relationship between the granny and her grandson. The two actors are very good, even though the storytelling technique is very traditional and the relations between the characters are old fashioned. As for *The Busy Young Psychic*, there are similar stories like this in Hong Kong films, so it is easy for me to relate. This is a story about religion, and depicts the main character in an unconventional way. It looks at psychic from another perspective, which makes this film distinctive.

Arvin: These two 30 minute shorts are very characteristic of new Taiwanese cinema, and both are about growing up and relationship between the young and old generations. The girl in *The Busy Young Psychic* is a very good actress and her character is comparatively more interesting, but the film is very conventional.

Kwong: Next, each of you can nominate three awards that you think deserve prizes.

Chan: I nominate *Dreams in the Depths*, *Butter Lamp* and *The Poet and Singer*.

Tan: My choices are the same.

Arvin: Mine is exactly the same as Chan Wai.

Kwong: We have not yet discussed which work should get the Gold Award. Can we eliminate the rest of the films?

(They agree.)

Chan: I choose *Dreams in the Depths* for the Gold Award.

Arvin: I choose *Butter Lamp*.

Kwong: We can focus our discussion on these two works.

Chan: If you compare the two, I tend to choose a work that is more dramatically based. *Butter Lamp's* form determines its content, while every aspect of *Dreams in the Depths* is interesting.

Tan: I feel that *Dreams in the Depths* is too designed. It follows a very clear formula about short films or short story. Every aspect is good, and that's why I am

suspicious of it. All the elements including the uncle arriving at just the right time and the soccer match are all good things about the film, but also they are also reasons I'm suspicious of it.

Chan: Does **ifva** have a theme of storytelling this year?

Kwong: That has nothing to do with the competition, which has no theme.

Tan: All of its storytelling elements are good, and it has everything a story is supposed to have. It is a very formulaic design, and it is done very precisely. That's why I'm suspicious of the director. The story is told very economically, expressing the story with the fewest possible means, which feels fake to me. I think we can encourage this director's mastery over the medium, but this is not a very personal work. However, it's a very clever film.

Chan: But what you said about ***Dreams in the Depths*** also applies to ***Butter Lamp***.

Tan: ***Butter Lamp*** does not have the kind of narrative I'm familiar with, and contains many elements that surprise me. It feels more realistic to me.

Chan: You think ***Dreams in the Depths*** is calculated, but I think of it is being precise. It is very powerful, and sheds light on the world outside the tunnel. ***Butter Lamp*** also has dramatic progression, and the selection of the kinds of family to present is also calculated. His editing also tries to achieve certain accuracy.

Tan: The calculated elements in ***Dreams in the Depths*** is something I can predict, while ***Butter Lamp*** contain elements that are unexpected for me, so this point is very personal.

Arvin: I feel ***Dreams in the Depths*** is a very complete story, while ***Butter Lamp*** has a very distinctive form that I haven't seen before, and it does not have a complete story. I like the fact that it merely offers up different segments, which may or may not be a good point. The ending of ***Dreams in the Depths*** is very clear, while ***Butter Lamp*** is not concerned with any one particular subject, but merely presents the audience with a taste of that world, which is a contrast between tradition and modernity.

Chan: Since this is **ifva**, I'll cast my vote for ***Butter Lamp***, because it is a kind of story that I haven't seen before, and this is very important. In my mind, ***Dreams in the Depths*** is the better film, but **ifva** is not an ordinary competition. It stresses independent spirit and how filmmakers use unconventional means of telling stories. If that's the case, then the Gold Award should go to ***Butter Lamp***.

Kwong: The Gold Award this year goes to ***Butter Lamp***.

Arvin: So you should agree with giving the Silver Award to *Dreams in the Depths*.

Chan/Tan: Yes.

Kwong: How about Special Mention? Should it go to *The Poet and Singer*? You also mentioned *The Questioning* in your discussions just now.

Tan: I would quite like to give recognition to *The Questioning*, because it is not the kind of creative work that I am familiar with. Can we give two Special Mentions?

Kwong: We are open to that, as long as this is what all of you wish for.

Tan: *The Poet and Singer* and *The Questioning* are both distinctive works in terms of their form and creativity. Even though they are not very complete, they each contain new elements.

Chan: If we recognize both works with Special Mentions, then the results are very comprehensive.

Arvin: Actually it's hard to compare these two films.

Kwong: So are you all in agreement with having two Special Mentions this year?

Arvin: I'm fine with that.

Asian New Force Category Award Winners

Gold Award

Butter Lamp / Hu Wei (China)

Silver Award

Dreams in the Depths / Armin Isarian (Iran)

Special Mention

The Poet and Singer / Bi Gan (China)

The Questioning / Zhu Rikun (China)