

AT THE END OF DAYBREAK
PRESSKIT TEXTS

EDITORIAL INTRO

Since his prize-winning debut with *Min*, Ho Yuhang has chosen to focus on characters in trouble – often people without the perspective or the language to fully understand their own predicaments. To start with, his films were mostly framed in long-shots, as if he was providing the ‘bigger picture’ that often eluded his characters. More and more, though, he’s entering his characters’ inner worlds and exploring their doubts, fears and manias. And although he’s still a matchless observer of contemporary Malaysian realities, this shift is bringing him closer to one of cinema’s greatest traditions. Its femme fatale may be only fifteen years old and its confused and solipsistic anti-hero may be just 23, but *At the End of Daybreak* is, amongst other things, a modern Malaysian film noir. (TR)

SYNOPSIS

Malaysia, now. The 23-year-old Tuck Chai is dating Ying, a schoolgirl who isn’t yet 16. They probably met in an internet chatroom. Their parents know nothing about the illicit relationship ... until Ying’s mother and father find birth-control pills in her room. That’s when their worlds start to shatter.

Tuck Chai lives with his mother, a woman who has never got over her husband abandoning her and moving in with her richer sister instead. Tuck Chai’s mother drinks too much, and doesn’t look after herself too well. But she would do anything for Tuck Chai. Anything at all. When Ying’s parents want to report Tuck Chai to the police (he will be charged with statutory rape for having sex with a minor), Tuck Chai’s mother pleads with them to settle out of court for cash compensation instead. They agree, and Tuck Chai’s mother de-means herself by turning to her ex-husband for a loan.

After receiving the money, Ying’s selfish parents decide that they want to go to the police regardless. Events become a blur. Ying tricks her parents and goes for a fateful meeting with Tuck Chai. The tensions between Tuck Chai and his mother become explosive. Before long, several lives are ruined and the police are involved after all ...

THE WRITER-DIRECTOR

HO Yuhang

was born and raised in Petaling Jaya, just outside the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur. He took a degree in engineering at Iowa State University in the US, but opted for a career in TV production when he returned to Malaysia. He soon began putting his training in the craft of programme-making to work in a series of personal short films and tapes. In 1999, he made the six-part documentary series *Semangat Insan: Masters of Tradition*. His debut feature *Min* followed in 2003; it was financed by television and shot on digital video, but was invited to many film festivals as a film and won the Special Jury Prize at the Festival des 3 Continents in Nantes, France. His subsequent features and shorts have been invited to an ever-widening circle of festivals and have won several more prizes, including the NETPAC Award and the Tiger Award for Best Short at International Film Festival Rotterdam (from *Sanctuary* and *As I Lay Dying* respectively). In 2008, he was one of three finalists for Martin Scorsese’s mentorship in an arts initiative sponsored by Rolex.

Films:

1996 Fragments (short for Cannes Kodak Student Workshop)
1997 Subway (short video)

1998	camera degree zero (short video)
2000	good friday at the zoo (short video)
2001	Not Far From Here (documentary)
2003	Min (DV feature) Classrooms (documentary short)
2004	Sanctuary (DV feature)
2006	Rain Dogs (35mm feature)
2007	As I Lay Dying (DV short)
2009	At the End of Daybreak (35mm feature)

CAST

CHUI Tien You (as Tuck Chai)

He was born in Hong Kong. He planned to work in the automobile industry after leaving high school, but a chance encounter brought him to the attention of director Fruit Chan. He appeared in TV commercials before appearing in movies. He went on to become one-half of the popular boy-band Shine, which dissolved in 2008. He's now actively pursuing his career as an actor, and *At the End of Daybreak* marks his first leading role. Previously, he has key roles in film *Glass Tears* (Carol Lai), *AV* (Pang Ho Cheung), *After This Our Exile* (Patrick Tam) and *Magic Boy* (Adam Wong)

WAI Ying-Hong (as the Mother)

Also known as Kara Hui or Hui Ying-Hung, she is a Hong Kong actress of Manchu ancestry. She was discovered by martial arts director Lau Kar-Leung (Liu Jialiang), who cast her in his film *Challenge of the Masters* (1976) and went on to give her leading roles in several of his films, including *The Lady is the Boss*. She won the Best Actress prize in the inaugural Hong Kong Film Awards for her role in Lau's film *My Young Auntie* (1982). Nowadays she works mainly in drama serials for the Hong Kong station TVB. Recently, she was in films such as *Legendary Assassin*, *Jiang Hu*, and *Infernal Affairs 2*.

NG Meng Hui (as Ying)

After reading Mass Communications at university, she worked in publishing before becoming a model. This led to acting opportunities, and she appeared in many TV shows, most notably the popular Malaysia-Singapore co-production *The Beginning* (2006). She currently hosts a morning radio show.

CREW

TEOH Gay Hian (Cinematographer)

Trained at the Taiwan National Academy of Arts and at the Northern School of Film and Television in England, he first worked on numerous documentaries and short films. One of his early feature credits was the English film *Monk Dawson*; his work received high praise in the magazine *Sight & Sound*. He returned to Malaysia in the mid-1990s and worked mainly on TV commercials until he made his name as director of photography on such Malaysian indie features as *Spinning Top* (Best Cinematography prize, Slam Dunk Film Festival), *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir*, *Embun* and *Paloh* most of which have won his prizes in Malaysia. He worked with the Indonesian director Garin Nugroho on the very ambitious *Opera Jawa*, a commission from the New Crowned Hope festival in Vienna to mark Mozart's 350th birthday. He has shot all of Ho Yuhang's features, *Min*, *Sanctuary* and *Rain Dogs*. He is also one of Malaysia's most sought-after directors of commercials.

GAN Siong King (Production Designer)

A graduate in Fine Arts (specializing in oil painting) from the Malaysia Institute of Arts, he is one of the most prominent emerging painters in South-east Asia. He has exhibited his work locally and internationally. His interest in film has led him to work in production and wardrobe design for various films (including Tsai Ming-Liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*) as well as some plays for the theater.

TU Duu-Chih (Sound Designer)

Before Tu's arrival on the scene in the 1980s, almost all Chinese films were shot without sound and then post-synched. He was responsible for reintroducing live sound recording, not to mention creative sound mixing, in the films of Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang and other directors of Taiwan's 'new wave'. He has latterly worked on the films of Wong Kar Wai and many other leading Chinese directors. *At the End of Daybreak* marks his second collaboration with Ho Yuhang, after *Rain Dogs*.

Pete TEO (Music Director)

A multi-award-winning singer-songwriter and one of the most visible artists in Malaysia's music scene. A 'poster boy' for the independent arts movement in Malaysia, he and his work have been featured on NPR, CBC, NHK and the BBC as well as the regional TV network Channel V. He has also acted in a number of Malaysian indie films, including Ho Yuhang's *Rain Dogs* and James Lee's *Before We Fall In Love Again* and *Call If You Need Me*. He performs frequently in Japan and Korea. He and Ho Yuhang are regular collaborators. Pete recently played a key role in a French language film, *Stretch* by Charles de Meux while also producing the soundtrack for the film *Talentine* by Yasmin Ahmad.

Lorna TEE (Producer)

A trained teacher who has been actively involved in film and theater productions and in arts education in Malaysia, Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia. Her film productions have included James Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and Ho Yuhang's *Rain Dogs*, the latter forming part of the Focus: First Cuts project, which was designed to showcase six up-and-coming directors – and in that series she produced *The Shoe Fairy*, *I'll Call You*, *Love Story*, *Crazy Stone* and *My Mother is a Belly Dancer*. She was instrumental in setting up the Cameronian Arts Awards for the performing arts in Malaysia, and worked with the inaugural Asian Film Awards in Hong Kong. She is a partner in Paperheart Limited, a production company based in Kuala Lumpur which aims to produce features by exciting new regional talents and also provides production support for international productions shooting in Malaysia. She divides her time between Malaysia and Hong Kong. Currently, she is the General Manager for Irresistible Films, a film company investing in new Asian directors set up by Bill Kong of Edko Films, Hugh Simon and Avex Entertainment (Japan).

PAPERHEART LIMITED (Production Company)

A production company formed by writer-director Ho Yuhang and producer Lorna Tee, two film-makers who have won numerous awards for their work on independent features while maintaining a commitment to the growth and commercial viability of the mainstream film industries in Hong Kong and Malaysia. Paperheart has just produced *Strangers* by emerging director Charlotte Lim and will next produce *Matderihkolaperlih* by the Malaysian theater ace Nam Ron. The company also provided production support for Tsai Ming-Liang's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, which was filmed on location in Malaysia.

HURT AND DIRT

from an interview with Ho Yuhang

The story was inspired by a news item, but have you tried to be faithful to the facts of the case or have you invented your own characters and situations?

It's true that I'm usually inspired by stories in the news, but I never want to be bound by the facts. There are usually a few key things that I need to know, but then I fill in the rest from my own imagination. When I get stuck into the writing, I always find myself taken into unknown places – and that's what I like, whether I'm starting from a factual source or not.

In this particular case, I started out with a general idea of what had happened. More important than researching the facts was to figure out what it was about the actual incident that grabbed me. Here, I realized that at some point the people involved had started making decisions and choices that actually made the problems

worse, with the result that things ended tragically. Factual incidents very often trump fiction; they can be funnier and sadder. This incident began as something quite typical of modern society and became exceptional as the problems escalated out of whack. My first thought when I came across it in the newspaper was: How could things go that far?

At the End of Daybreak looks and feels quite different from your previous features. What made you start using fast cutting and camera movements?

Liao Ching-Sung, who edited my last feature Rain Dogs, said that he'd like to see me shoot "a really direct picture, just shooting what you want to see". It sounded simple enough, but I took a while thinking about it. I took the idea for this film from a story in a tabloid newspaper. That provided some interesting facts that I could use, and they were lurid enough to dictate the film's style. I felt that I could and should tell the story as it was: linear, in-your-face, and fast.

Especially in the closing scenes, you leave some narrative developments offscreen. Why the somewhat oblique approach?

Maybe it's because I didn't really know how to end the story – or, more exactly, that I don't really want to know. This is a tricky question. If I came up with a conventional resolution, I might well botch it. I actually wrote and shot a different ending. It was a pain-in-the-ass single take, and it took almost a whole day to do it: the boy goes home and cuts his own hair and weeps as the cops come for him. But when I was editing the film, I didn't feel the emotion in that shot as strongly as I had on the set. The shot seemed a little too "romantic" and it looked too much like an "ending". Instead, I opted to use a shot that we'd classed as "NG" because we felt that it wasn't composed properly. And that shot gave us a kind of "closure" that was more mysterious and more bleak.

Where does your title At the End of Daybreak come from? Is it another quote from Faulkner, like the title of your short As I Lay Dying?

No, I took it from a poem. The original draft of the story ended with the boy wandering in a dilapidated industrial area till daybreak, so the title seemed to catch his wretched feelings exactly. But the way I planned to shoot it seemed a bit too Antonioni-ish when the time came, so I changed the ending during production – but kept the title. I guess I had just gotten used to it, and anyway, I hadn't thought of a better one. It still has a kind of premonitory edge to it, as if something bad is lurking just out of sight. The short film, by the way, had nothing to do with Faulkner; I just borrowed his title in the hope that some of his creative energy would rub off on me!

There's not much of a pool of professional actors in Malaysia, and you've sometimes used non-professionals in your previous films. Who are your main actors this time, and how did you choose them?

The cast is a mixture of professionals and friends, plus some others found in a casting call. I'd wanted to work with Wai Ying-Hong, who plays the boy's mother, for quite some time. I'd thought of casting her in Rain Dogs, but we couldn't find her at that time. (She's an ex-martial arts star, credited as "Hui Ying-Hung" or "Kara Hui" on her Shaw Brothers movies.) Some friends in Hong Kong helped me to track her down, and we sent her the script. She wanted to be part of it, even though she's very tied up with TV serials which give her a very tight schedule.

The boy who plays Tuck Chai is someone I saw in a Hong Kong film. He was playing only a bit-part there, but he resembled the character I'd written. I finally met him and hung out with him; after that, I didn't look

for anyone else for the role. The underage girlfriend Ying was an actress I'd seen in a film by Tan Chui-Mui. It was an anonymous role but she had a kind of strange intensity; I met her and found that impression confirmed. Her best friend Wan is played by a loopy high-school girl who came to our open casting call. Ying's father is played by a friend of mine (we play football together), and his wife is played by a local TV actress who could talk my ears off!

Like Fassbinder and some other European directors, you're working with a team of regular collaborators. Who are they, and why have you picked them to work with?

The cinematographer Teoh Gay Hian has shot all my films. What's interesting about him is that he likes to take risks. We try to find a different way of telling the story in each new project and he's always game to try whatever new direction I'm suggesting. Somehow, we always find ourselves slightly dissatisfied with whatever we last made together, and so a new project gives us the chance to 'redeem' ourselves. We try to fix whatever we didn't like last time, and think that we'll get it right this time around. Of course, we're kidding ourselves... but there's always the next film, hopefully.

Gan Siong King, the production designer, is a painter. He understands texture very well, and his input is invaluable to the look of the film. Sometimes he sees the big picture better than me, coming up with spontaneous questions which I find I can't immediately answer. That helps pull me down off my high horse.

Pete Teo is a musician but he has also acted in my films and in some other Malaysian indie movies. He had some wild and interesting ideas for the soundtrack after seeing the rough-cut, ideas to take the film into entirely new territory. So naturally he came on board.

And the sound designer Tu Duu-Chih is one of the key figures in Taiwan's 'new wave' cinema. I first met him in France a few years ago and we got along really well. I told him I'd love to work with him one day, and it finally happened on my last film Rain Dogs. The standard he sets for mixing sound and creating new audio landscapes is so high that I'd now hesitate to let anyone else mess with the sound of my films.

You are clearly drawn to stories in which the central characters find themselves trapped in events which spiral out of their control, and these stories often touch on issues of crime and punishment. Are these echoes of some aspect of your own life?

The stories I write do steer closer and closer to the elements of crime. Crime stories cut to the quick of human behavior. People do things for many reasons, some of them inexplicable. We can investigate those reasons and imagine that we're finding psychological truths. But I'm more interested in what they do than what makes them tick. I admit that I immerse myself in writing scripts to try to understand and to see things more clearly, which is in fact a way of trying to get to know myself. More and more, I see myself working on stories with very stirring hurt and dirt. They may well involve getting into emotional states that I've failed to comprehend – either in my own personal life or in the lives of others – and that surely makes them worth excavating. And it's a fact that people I know or have known tend to find their way into my films.

-- from an interview by Tony Rayns (April 2009)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Running Time	94 minutes
Gauge	35mm 1:1.85 Color
Sound	Dolby 5.1
Language	Cantonese/Mandarin
Year of Production	2009

Country of Production

Malaysia/ South Korea

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