

## “Even If You Have Nothing, You Should Keep Filming”: An Interview with Cheng Yu-Chieh on 'Wawa No Cidal' (2015)

Article (Accepted Version)

Brown, Christopher (2017) “Even If You Have Nothing, You Should Keep Filming”: An Interview with Cheng Yu-Chieh on 'Wawa No Cidal' (2015). *Senses of Cinema* (82). ISSN 1443-4059

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## **‘Even if you have nothing, you should keep filming’: an interview with Cheng Yu-Chieh on *Wawa No Cidal* (2015)**

Cheng Yu-Chieh’s film *Wawa No Cidal* (2015) relates the story of journalist Panay (Ado Kaliting Pacidal), a woman of aboriginal Taiwanese heritage, who returns to her hometown and comes into conflict with developers who are seeking to build illegally on her tribe’s ancestral land. The film’s Amis-language title translates as *Children of the Sun*, and the film has also been released abroad under the title *Panay*. It has been Cheng’s biggest hit to date, returning ten times more domestic box office than his previous cinematic feature *Yang Yang* (2009). It won the audience award at the 2015 Taipei Film Festival and screened at festivals internationally in 2016, including at the Chinese Visual Festival in London, where it won the Jury Award. When making the film, Cheng collaborated with Lekal Sumi, who shot the original documentary upon which parts of *Wawa No Cidal* are based; the pair share a directing credit.[1. Lekal’s short film, *Wish of the Ocean Rice* (2012), focused on his mother’s role in restoring a paddy field. The film, which was not widely released, is viewable online: <http://green.ngo.org.tw/en/video/605>]

Taiwan’s aboriginal peoples, referred to in Mandarin as *Taiwan yuanzhumin* or ‘Taiwan original inhabitants’, account for around 2.3% of the island’s population, over half a million people.[2. According to official census data from 2014. See *The Republic of China Yearbook 2014* (Executive Yuan, 2014), p. 49.] In the twentieth century, aboriginal culture was suppressed first under Japanese colonial rule, and later under the Kuomintang (KMT). During the period of martial law (1947-87), Mandarin was adopted as Taiwan’s official language and the freedom of indigenous cultures restricted, which resulted in the political, social and economic marginalisation of groups who were not Han Chinese. Despite the liberalisation of recent decades and a drive to embrace the island’s diversity, aboriginal groups still face numerous challenges in their struggle for equality. Although indigenous music has risen in popularity, filmic representations remain rare. The historical epic *Seediq Bale* (Wei Te-Sheng, 2011) was an exception, though it attracted controversy for its inaccuracies.[3. While *Seediq Bale* was praised for dramatizing a previously marginalised history, the film was criticized both for factual inaccuracies, and for its narrative emphasis on a heroic, unifying figure. For a summary of these debates, see: China Post staff, “Seediq controversy highlights that life isn’t black and white”, *The China Post*, 14 September 2011. <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/editorial/taiwan-issues/2011/09/14/316640/Seediq-controversy.htm> (this is an English-language summary of an earlier article published in the *Apple Daily*). Also see: Darryl Sterk, “Subjective, objective, and indigenous history: Seediq Bale’s take on the Wushe Incident”, *Savage Minds*, 4 January 2012. <http://savageminds.org/2012/01/04/seediq-bale-as-history/>] But *Wawa No Cidal* is perhaps more significant as it focuses on the depiction of the challenges facing a contemporary aboriginal tribe in Taiwan.

In the film, Panay quits her job in Taipei to return to her two children and ailing father, who live in the village of Makudai on the East Coast. Overseeing the restoration of the tribe’s derelict paddy fields, Panay comes into conflict with developers who are seeking to build a hotel complex on the tribe’s land. Assisted by corrupt officials, the developers attempt the illegal requisition of the paddy fields. Though heavily fictionalised, a notable feature of *Wawa No Cidal* is that its cast – with the exception of Pacidal and Bokeh Kosang (who plays estate agent Sheng) – are nonprofessionals: locals who are in many cases re-enacting events in which they themselves participated. The film dramatises a real-life incident in which the villagers staged a demonstration in the fields, which resulted in a violent clash with the police; a video of the protest went viral on YouTube and generated national outrage.

**Image 1: Ado Kaliting Pacidal as Panay. Courtesy of Filmosa Productions.**

Like his contemporaries, Cheng began making films after the New Taiwan Cinema and its second wave had finished, by which time noted directors such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Ang Lee were long since established. Compared to the work of these *auteurs*, it has often proven difficult to find a similar level of consistency in the theme or form of films made by the new generation of Taiwanese directors. Critics continue to debate and challenge the usefulness of ‘national cinema’ models in this context, but Cheng nonetheless considers himself to be working in the ‘spirit’ of Hou and Yang, as he elaborates below. Last year, he set up his own production company *Filmosa*, a pun on Formosa, Taiwan’s historical Portuguese name, which surely points to his interest in addressing questions of national identity.

That said, Cheng operates in a vastly different industrial context to that of the New Taiwan Cinema practitioners, one which – following the runaway success of *Cape No. 7* (Wei Te-Sheng, 2008) – is far more commercial in orientation. This entails pressures and disappointments: in the last eight years, three of Cheng’s feature projects have fallen apart at the last minute due to funding problems. He is persistent, however, and has proven versatile, exploiting the different formats available to him. He has directed shorts, music videos and a TV movie, while his TV series *Days We Stared at the Sun* (distributed via an innovative strategy that utilised YouTube premieres) is one of his most daring pieces of work. Aimed at a youth audience, it commences as a high school drama, but audaciously evolves into an insistent critique of the social, economic, and political pressures facing a young teenager. The ending is bloody and subversive.

Consistency of form has never been a priority for Cheng, who instead tailors his style to fit the story and target audience. His debut feature *Do Over* (2006) was a surreal, overtly philosophical work that weaved together a tapestry of interconnected stories, including one dramatising the experience of illegal immigrants from Thailand. *Yang Yang* (2009) was a far more pared-down, stylistically assured piece of work, focusing relentlessly on a young Eurasian woman training to become an athlete and then an actress. The TV movie *My Little Honeymoon* (2012) related the struggle of a Vietnamese woman who feels trapped in her marriage to a poor Taiwanese farmer.

If Cheng remains preoccupied with identity politics in *Wawa No Cidal*, then his formal approach is unabashedly more commercial than in his previous work. He addresses controversial themes, but in seeking to reach a wider audience, has fashioned an accessible melodrama, with touching performances and an upbeat tone. This interview took place at Cheng’s office in Xindian, Taipei on 27 June 2016.

**Image 2: Cheng Yu-Chieh in his office, with film posters for *Wawa No Cidal* and *Yang Yang* in the background.**

**CB: *Wawa No Cidal* continues your focus on characters who are caught between cultures and marginalised in some way. Why do you always return to this theme?**

CYC: I reckon the answer relates to my own background. As my father is Japanese-Chinese, I was always called a ‘Jap’ by my classmates when I was very young, around my first year in elementary school, even though this wasn’t the case at all. I think this influenced me. Soon afterwards, I was transferred to another school, because I wasn’t able to fit in. While I studied at this other school, I decided to conceal my background completely, to the extent that I didn’t allow my father to visit the school under any circumstances. Prior to making films, I spent a very long time, with enormous effort, proving my Taiwanese identity to everyone. But now I no longer need to prove this to anyone.

**CB: How familiar are Taiwanese audiences with films and stories about the indigenous peoples? How has the film been received?**

CYC: When we screened this film in Taipei, many people considered it to be very remote, as if the story belonged to another country. Some people didn't even believe that what they saw had really happened. However, back in Hualien and Taidong, people responded to it very positively. This kind of feature film, that is, a commercial film shot from an East Coast perspective, focusing on Hualien and Taidong, is rare. Other films have been shot there, but they are still from the perspective of Taipei; they do not offer a genuinely local perspective. *Wawa No Cidal* has two directors, and its main reference point is the documentary made by Lekal Sumi, which represents the perspective of a local person. So basically, our storytelling angle is that of director Lekal. This resonated massively throughout the East Coast, because finally, there was a film speaking for the inhabitants. Our indigenous audiences were also crazy about it. Going to watch this film with indigenous audiences was a huge honour for us. They wore their traditional costumes, which shows how seriously they take the film. Traditionally, their costumes are used only in rituals for ancestors, or for the visit of very important guests. So for us, it's truly special when young kids are willing to wear their traditional costumes and go to the cinema. However in the mainstream Taiwanese media, *Wawa No Cidal* was hardly reported. I think that's why we needed to make this film. Films about aboriginal people, or aboriginal issues or themes, are ignored automatically, perhaps with the exception of *Seediq Bale*, because it was directed by Wei Te-Sheng. The day before yesterday, for example, our theme song was awarded 'Best Song of the Year' in the Golden Melody Awards – not just the 'Best Mother Tongue Song,' but the best song out of them all. This is the first time in twenty-seven years that they've given this award to a mother-tongue song! It should have been a huge headline as it's a very prestigious award, but we didn't see anything in the papers the next day, or since ... The indigenous, and the non-mainstream, are always marginalised and ignored.

**CB: So how did you first meet Lekal Sumi and see his documentary?**

CYC: I met him at his home. I was on a research trip to the East Coast area for another project I was working on. Whilst doing many interviews with a lot of people, I met his mother. At the time, she was too busy to speak to me, so told me: 'Why not go and speak to my son, since he is also a documentary filmmaker?' So that's how I came to know him. On that day, we exchanged our work. I was extremely impressed by his work.

**CB: Being an outsider, there's always the risk that you might misrepresent the community. Were you worried about that beforehand?**

CYC: Yes, I worried about that. So that's why we needed Lekal. And that's why we needed to discuss the story.

**CB: Could you talk a bit about this collaboration – how did the pair of you divide the work?**

CYC: Everyone is curious about this. I would say we didn't have a strict agreement for dividing our work, but naturally ended up doing what we were good at. In terms of directing actors, I was in charge of Ado and Bokeh Kosang, whereas the other actors from the tribe, such as the grandfather and the children, would be Lekal's responsibility. This was of course because they knew him better and they could confide in him. So he directed them. Regarding the storyline, basically it was down to both of us. I would write something

first, then discuss it with him. If he told me that something was wrong or inappropriate, we would change it to what he thought was more appropriate. Using this method, we didn't have many conflicts, since I would use his words if we realised there were any differences. On the other hand, the technical aspects would be my call, because he only had experience in documentary, and I was able to communicate with the crew from a technical perspective. Having said that, his documentary experience was also indispensable. I took this to be a mutual process – sometimes we'd do things his way, sometimes my way.

**CB: So there were no disagreements?**

CYC: If there were any disagreements, I obeyed his decision. Because it's his home. He knows what is best for his village. For me, it's a film. But for him, it's his real life ... I leave the village after shooting, but he lives there.

**CB: The film is shot mostly in the Fengbin township area, which is not that easy to access. I'm wondering about the practicalities of shooting there. What was the size of the crew and where did you stay? What camera equipment did you use?**

CYC: It was quite a small team; we had about thirty people. We stayed in a guesthouse near the village. The budget was about sixteen million and we used a RED Epic. I had planned to use a smaller camera originally, a BlackMagic would have been fine. But I applied to the Film Subsidiary Fund and I got it. As such, I felt a responsibility – my film needed to be high-profile enough for a screening in any commercial cinema. The budget was raised, so in the end I chose the Epic.

**CB: It must have been quite hard to transport a RED Epic to some of the locations.**

CYC: Yes, it was hard. But I feel the most difficult part was not that we had to travel to remote mountains or work by the shore. Mobility was indeed a tricky issue for us, but the true difficulty of using that huge machine is that it made the most natural stuff disappear. It requires lots of people for its massive size, whereas sometimes, if you use a small camera, more like doing a documentary, you can capture things in their natural state. But once we set up the Epic, because it was so big, some of the most beautiful things were lost. So we needed to buy this back with time; we spent a very long time waiting, letting people get familiar with us, so they would forget about our existence. For me, this was the tricky part. There is one scene at the end of the film, for example, in which a lot of people have a barbeque under the shade of the trees. On set we allowed them to have a real barbeque, and they did! They just started eating, and once they'd forgotten about us being there, we sent the actor in. I didn't shout 'action' or anything like that. We just let the postman, a real postman from the village who knows everyone, hand out the mail. And then we finished, with just one take. Only after we stopped, did everyone on set finally realise that we'd finished. They said: 'ah, really?', having no clue that we'd secretly been filming.

**CB: So did you just film anything you saw in the village, people going about their daily business?**

CYC: No, we had to get approval, especially in that village, as it's the most traditional one on the East Coast. We needed to get the permits, agreement from the locals, before we pressed the record button. In that village they have what we call the 'age-grade system.' Amongst the Amis tribe they have eight grades, and one in the middle is 'Mama No Kapah', the Father of the Youth. He is not at the top of the hierarchy, only in the middle. Of course, every tribe has its own management system, but in the tribe where we filmed, it

was like this. So whilst making the film, even during pre-production, for anything related to the tribe, we had to get permits through this ‘Mama No Kapah.’

**CB: Is that how you cast the actors, through negotiation with the village?**

CYC: No, the lead actress isn't from the village, though she is also an Amis, from a tribe a bit further away. The reason for this is that there aren't many young people in the village. So we had to search outside. In fact, the Makudai children came from the next village, because the Makudai school authority wouldn't let them take time off. The other characters, such as the grandfather and anyone else appearing onscreen, are from Makudai, where we stayed. Moreover, they play characters who are very close to their own daily lives. For instance, there is one old lady, Ina, who has a conflict with the police in front of the paddy field. We literally shot that scene in her field, which was nearly taken away during the government requisition. So she herself had participated in this demonstration. We tried our best to find local people who had similar experiences.

**Image 3: Cheng's recreation of the clash between village protesters and the police. Courtesy of Filmosa Productions.**

**CB: Did any of the villagers find it difficult to reenact their experience – was it upsetting for them?**

CYC: No, because they really wanted other people to know about it; they wanted other people to hear their voice. I also chose to film those scenes in a way that was much gentler than the reality had been. For me, the point of the scene is what Ina says to the young policeman: ‘My boy, which tribe are you from?’ The humanity in this conflict is what I really want to address. As for the clash, the dragging and pulling of the police, or the conflicts, I would recommend that you watch it on YouTube. You'll see that the real situation was harsher and more cruel. When they were performing that scene, the actors playing the policemen were worried about hurting the inhabitants. But Ina would tell them: ‘You can be harder. It's alright.’

**CB: The film premiered in the village where it was shot. Did the villagers like it?**

CYC: Yes! They liked it very much and are very proud of it. They're also now very proud of Lekal, because they think he is an excellent young man to speak for their people.

**CB: Do the issues you depict, the development of ancestral land and corrupt land acquisition, broadly reflect the experience of other communities in Taiwan?**

CYC: It happens in many rural areas of Taiwan. Maybe in Taipei it's less likely, because people are good at lawsuits. But in the countryside, many people might never speak to a lawyer in their whole life. And this is why some people want to take advantage of them. Their attitude is like this: ‘What can you do to me? Sue me?’ People living in Taipei may not be aware that this kind of thing goes on.

**CB: On this note, the character of Sheng, who negotiates the deal with the developers, is one of the most sympathetic estate agents I have seen in a film! He could easily have become a villain – why did you make him so likeable?**

CYC: There are a lot of people like Sheng, and they may be around you, they may be your own relatives. Even though they never intend to hurt you, you could have conflicts when it

comes to land, due to contradictory values. In lots of movies, we have one bad guy, and we try to kill him in the end, in the hopes that the world will be peaceful. But in my opinion, reality isn't like this at all. So it boils down to a difference of values. When we were shooting, the real situation was like that. The township mayor who is most in favour of development projects is from Makudai, but interestingly enough, the person who is fighting the most sincerely for protection is also from Makudai. All along the East Coast, it's a similar story. But, when they have their Harvest Festival, the one you see at the end of the film, they still belong to the same community ... I've realised there's something in the village that we might not be able to perceive back in the city. I call it the business of the tribe. Sheng, an estate agent, still helps his fellow villagers when they are working on the paddy field restoration, because fixing the irrigation canals has become the business of the tribe, regardless of what else he does in his daily life.

**CB: Panay gives up her career as a journalist, and as she returns home and starts farming, you place great emphasis on the bond between her and the land. Isn't this a rather sentimental view of rural life? Do people really return home like this? After all, many young people have left the villages for the cities.**

CYC: It's sentimental in that people who choose to go back are certainly fewer in number than the people who leave – that is correct. However, there are still many people, more and more recently, who have decided to move back to the tribe. The aspect that we sentimentalised is that people wouldn't return as a result of just one incident. Normally it's due to an accumulation of many incidents. There will be a last straw that makes you give up your job and return to the hometown.

**CB: But she's a journalist. Surely the people in the village need the media and people like Panay to represent them.**

CYC: Panay works as journalist, the reason being that she wants to speak for the people in her tribe. But her chief editor doesn't let her. As a result, she comes to feel that it's hopeless to think she can help her people through her work. She already feels strongly that her family needs her, whereas her company only needs another employee, not her point of view ... So she decides to give up. And why did we choose this story? Because it is the collective experience of many Taiwanese aboriginal elites. In the cities, regardless of whether they are journalists, politicians, or teachers, their motivation is to do something for their tribes. But on many occasions they encounter this commercial system, in which there isn't a market for Taiwanese aborigines. They only have a small population. In film, music or whatever, they will face the same problem. Like Suming, for instance.[4. Suming Rupi, the film's composer and a noted indigenous musician] For a very long time previously, he chose to sing in Mandarin, because this allowed him to squeeze into the market, to express what he wanted to say. But the moment he made this decision, he realised he has started to lose his own culture. Later, he chose to write songs in his mother tongue, even though many indigenous singers wouldn't do so.

**CB: How important is music in the film? Ado is known as a singer, as well as an actress and presenter, and the film has lots of songs on the soundtrack compared to your previous films.**

CYC: This is because in the life of Taiwanese aborigines, especially amongst the Amis tribe, music is in their genes. I think it's an expression of life. In Makudai, almost everyone I met can sing and play guitar – some of them even have their own songs. They

sing at work and while drinking ... There's a joke in the village. People say that if you're in the tribe and can't sing, you'll get a disability card.

**CB: In the film, we see the tribespeople wearing traditional costume and dancing for tourists, performing. Your films all seem to be about acting to some extent, about people putting on a show for others. Is this because you are also worked as an actor?**

YC: No, I don't think so. I think it's because it's part of real life. Everyone is basically pretending. The difference is whether you do it consciously or not ... That's the reason I feel that real, pure things are so precious. I have this feeling, in fact, that everyone is pretending, to the extent that this whole island is pretending it is the Republic of China. You know, our name is the Republic of China, but to be honest we are Taiwan. We're pretending we represent China. So I think our country, in a certain way, is based on an illusion ... In such circumstances many things are illusory. We still need to pay tax, do our military service, get fined or whatever. But this so-called concept of nation, or the things that people perceive as very important and serious, are based on an illusion. The most important things are intangible and ineffable. These things are the reason making a film can touch you, communicate with your heart. A film can be overwhelming not because of the things you see on the screen. On the contrary, it's because of what lies behind it, something you can't describe in words.

**CB: Nakaw, Panay's daughter, is a runner and we see her training in athletics. The way you filmed her practicing the set position recalls a similar scene in *Yang Yang*. Is this becoming a signature?**

CYC: It's purely a coincidence. In *Yang Yang* I did it intentionally, consciously. But in *Wawa No Cidal* it was different, because Dongi Kacaw, the girl who played Nakaw, was very reserved. She was afraid of cameras when we started shooting. I discovered that she was good at running, so I thought I would film something she's good at, in order to give her more confidence.

**Image 4: Nakaw (Dongi Kacaw) prevents a digger from commencing excavation of her tribe's ancestral land. Courtesy of Filmosa Productions.**

**CB: You often work with young actors. Most of your films have a child or a young person in an important role. Is there any reason for that?**

CYC: Because I'm young? (laughs) I'm not sure. I feel that in the past, I was projecting myself onto the young actors. But now, because I'm a father, my perspective on young people, especially children, is different to before. I tend to think more from a father's perspective ... like I want to take good care of them.

**CB: Your TV series *Days We Stared at the Sun* was also aimed at kids.**

CYC: Yes, high school teenagers. This series actually broke some records. To begin with, we had a very particular marketing strategy. Before this series, the typical audience of Taiwan Public Television was 35 years old or over. At that time, YouTube was just getting started. So I convinced them to put the first episode on YouTube, since firstly we didn't have any stars, which meant that we couldn't promote it using our cast, and secondly, they had no pressure from the advertisers because they are a public broadcaster. If they had advertisers, they'd be faced with pressure from their advertisers. So I said to them ... "Why not just put the first episode online before the TV broadcast, and I reckon that after



the audience has seen the first episode, they will want to see the next one.” The result was that lots of senior high school students watched it. The reason, I guess, is that only senior high students, and students at universities, used YouTube. Our ratings became really great.

**CB: Despite the ending, in which the central character Hao-Yuan dies, I gather you’re making a second series. What will be the focus be, now that Hao-Yuan is gone?**

CYC: Our cast were young people, who were around seventeen years old when we made the first series. Five years later, they are at the age where they are graduating from university. During these years, society in Taiwan has changed – and young Taiwanese people, especially university students, have to a great extent participated in this change. It seems to create an opposition of generations – there is the generation of university students, who are younger than me by about ten years, and the generation of those who are fifty-something. I happen to be in the middle. This generation conflict is now very strong, and you can see this, for instance, in the Sunflower Movement or the movement against proposed school curriculum changes by the government. These aren’t simply demonstrations. They really change society in Taiwan. Being in the middle, I can empathise with, and understand, both the university students and the older generation.

**CB: Speaking of generations, I’d say most western audiences who are familiar with Taiwanese cinema probably associate it with the work of a previous generation of filmmakers: Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Ang Lee. What influence have these figures had on filmmakers of your generation?**

CYC: I haven’t worked with them directly, but I believe that all young Taiwanese filmmakers are influenced by their spirit, whether we are making films in a similar genre or not. Basically, we all started from the point where we had nothing, and in essence, we all do this for love and passion ... I think Taiwan certainly needs its own films, but regular audiences might not be aware of this importance. They may think that they only need to watch Hollywood films for recreation ... But we, as Taiwanese artists, feel that Taiwan needs its own films, so whether they are commercial or not, we still keep making films in that spirit. A spirit is more important than business. It’s been passed on from the previous generation, from Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s generation. The spirit might be different when it gets passed on to us, but it certainly is passed on, and for us, this inheritance is very important. Like now, I’ve also started to work with some young directors, Lekal for instance. I wouldn’t say this is like helping them, but more like working together, cooperating so that we can keep passing on this spirit ... It’s like this: you still have to tell your own story even if you have nothing. Even if you have nothing, you should keep filming.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Luc Sung Yu-Lun for the translation of this interview, which was conducted in both Mandarin and English.

### **About the author**

Christopher Brown is a film researcher, director and screenwriter. His articles have appeared in journals including *Film Criticism* and the *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, and his most recent work *Soap* screened at the Vancouver International Film Festival and the New Jersey International Film Festival. He has won several awards as a screenwriter and his film *Remission* was distributed by Peccadillo Pictures in 2015.