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Life cycles: an interview with director Bon An

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Bon An (安邦) has established himself as a compelling new talent in Taiwanese cinema. His feature films *Black Sheep* (2016) and *Sen Sen* (2018) are finely controlled dramas that demonstrate the director's aptitude for generating slow-burn emotional conflict. Crucial to the impact of these films is An's work with actors, who deliver poignant performances. He most recently directed the Hong Kong actress Nina Paw, who made her Taiwanese debut in *Sen Sen*; she is perhaps best known to international audiences for her starring role in Ann Hui's 2008 drama *The Way We Are*, for which she won Best Actress at the Hong Kong Film Awards.

In *Sen Sen*, Paw plays a grandmother facing up to a terminal illness, who decides to produce a series of webcasts which are viewed by a young boy called Sen (Wu Zhi-xuan), who is searching for ways to cope with the death of his brother. *Black Sheep* tells the story of an alcoholic father (Han Chang) and his wayward teenage son (Pan Chin-yu) who come into conflict as they endure a precarious existence in a small apartment. In both films, An stages the action in confined environments at an unhurried pace, using careful framing that is attuned to the rhythms of the characters' lives. This reflects his unease at the speed with which information travels in the digital age, something he discusses in this interview. 'I really worry,' An reflects, 'that people have no time to think and feel.' By contrast, the approach to time in *Sen Sen* owes more to the natural rhythms of *sheng sheng bu xi* (the first two Chinese characters 生生 are the same as the film's title), to which An alludes below. Often translated as the 'circle of life', *sheng sheng bu xi* connotes more complex philosophical ideas relating to a never-ending cycle of birth and regeneration, often associated with the four seasons.

The style of An's work sometimes recalls devices associated with the New Taiwan Cinema (c.1982-1990) and its Second Wave (c.1990-2008) – such as his occasional use of scenes filmed in one take, or shots of long duration. *Black Sheep*, for instance, features a one-take scene in which the father and son attempt to free a bird trapped in their apartment. The shot lasts 4 minutes and 43 seconds, its length dictated largely by the actors' response to the creature's movements. Yet if the director's work evokes the traits associated with earlier art cinema, then it also reflects more recent trends. In the last decade, Taiwanese cinema has been driven by a more popular mode of filmmaking, and *Sen Sen*, especially, exhibits this tendency. The film has an accessible narrative structure, relatable performances, clear emotional payoffs, and dramatizes the role of digital technology in shaping human relationships.

Critical coverage of recent Taiwanese filmmaking has been limited. There is continued interest in *auteur* directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Ang Lee, and in recent years, scholars of Taiwanese cinema have analysed the blockbusters of Wei Te-sheng, whose hit film *Cape No. 7* (2008) is generally seen as heralding a new era in the island's filmmaking.¹ Yet the smaller-scale, independent productions which account for much of the island's recent cinematic output tend to be less visible to international audiences. In this sense, Bon An's films offer an interesting point of access to those less familiar with recent Taiwanese filmmaking, and a chance to appreciate an exciting new talent at work.

An is currently working on several projects, including a film about a young character's experiences during the window period of HIV, and another project about kids from underprivileged backgrounds who gather in empty or derelict houses. If his previous films are anything to go by, then Bon An looks set to consolidate himself as one of Taiwan's most thoughtful and original filmmakers.

Black Sheep and *Sen Sen* screened at various international festivals and are available to watch on DVD. This interview took place in Yongchun district, Taipei, on 28 June 2019.

CB: Let's start with *Black Sheep*. Where did the idea for the project come from?

BA: It was inspired by my family. One day, my nephew had a row with his mother, my sister. He was maybe only a junior high school student when this happened. But I couldn't believe how he wanted to physically fight back, with his arms waving in the air. This image kindled my imagination. With hindsight, I realised that this was exactly how his parents behaved. When my nephew was little, if he didn't behave, they would beat him. But now he was a grown-up teenager, so of course his mother wasn't able to behave as she had previously. Their positions had switched, but the violence was copied, which intrigued me greatly.

What the film sought to address is the fact that there is no door in the house of these two men. I don't know how this works in different cultures, but in Taiwan, as kids, we would slam the door every time our mother told us off.

CB: Yes, there are a lot of portals in the film – doors, frames, windows – and they seem to be part of the drama.

BA: I was wondering whether a more intimate interaction might occur once the door disappeared. On the contrary, I realised that an Asian father and son usually don't talk to one another. Hence, if you open the door between them, they become more uneasy, not closer.

CB: Were you thinking about that kind of space, the interior of a house without doors, when you wrote the script?

BA: Having a house without a door was decided in the script. Nonetheless, we made some adjustments regarding the condition of the house, and how we represented their personalities and living conditions, after we locked the location.

CB: What were you were looking for when you auditioned the actors?

BA: We looked for the kid first, since I already had a very clear image of the character in my mind, which was very much like my nephew. He needed to have an important quality; he looks rebellious, obeys nothing, but is actually very kind and tender inside. He isn't evil or bad at all. Once we found our kid, we started wondering – what kind of person would his father be? My very first thought was that he is like a rock, very stubborn, which is an essential trait. But his stubbornness derives from his inferiority complex. He has no confidence.

CB: Some of the acting looks like it was improvised – was it?

BA: I remember on that production, when giving instructions to the actors, an important thing was environment. You feel disconcerted once you step on set, because it looks just like what you see on screen. I let the actors get used to the location for one or two days, asking them to imagine that they were trapped in that environment. On set, I only gave instructions such as "How are you feeling now?." I didn't tell the actors to raise their right arm or left hand, or anything like that. I just gave them instructions with respect to their feelings.

CB: So it was more about giving them a general sense of direction.

BA: Yes. I was struck by one particular scene, in which the father slits his wrists in the bathroom. In the script, the description is there, but we didn't allow the kid to see the actual set dressing in the space, nor who was in it. Although the kid had read the script and knew how he was supposed to act, he had no idea what the image would look like.

CB: So you got a spontaneous reaction.

BA: It's kind of like an improvised performance. When he approaches and sees his father lying there, covered with blood, he is absolutely stunned.

CB: Another scene that stands out is the one in which the father and son try to catch a bird which is trapped in their apartment. Again I was wondering, did you tell the actors exactly what to do? Was it a stunt bird?

BA: (laughs) I released the bird, and asked them to catch it. That's it.

CB: Did you have any idea how long that that scene should last?

BA: I had a rough idea about the length, but that didn't mean that I felt obliged to tell them "Ah, you'd better catch it now." Because the bird was out of our control (laughs). Actually, the Director of Photography and I had an agreement. We'd discussed beforehand and agreed that we should let the actors own the space; the camera would work around them.

CB: In several scenes, the characters don't really communicate verbally. It's all physical. What are the challenges in directing this kind of performance?

BA: First and foremost, we couldn't let the actors get hurt (laughs). Luckily, the kid had been practicing martial arts, while the actor who plays the father is himself also a director. As a result, one of them knew the physical moves, while the other knew how to perform for the camera – he understood the mechanism of fake action. They worked just fine.

CB: A lot of scenes take place within the apartment. How was it filming in a confined space?

BA: In the script, I had already made the space an important part of the set-up. They are two people who are trapped, and the son wants to escape. I think the confined space does serve the story, but in terms of the actual shoot, our camera positions often repeated themselves.

CB: Yeah, you'd have to think about the set-up carefully beforehand, in order to vary the camera language.

BA: I feel that in that space, I learned something very important: mise-en-scène. I could use blocking to achieve a variation in framing. It felt like theatre.

CB: A lot of recent Taiwanese films feature an absent father, whereas in *Black Sheep* it's the mother who has left. Is there any reason for this?

BA: If *Sen Sen* is a story dedicated to mothers, *Black Sheep* was originally written for my dad and myself. Yes, the story wasn't about us, it was about something that happened between my

nephew and his parents. However, to a certain degree, it demonstrates that the communication between an Asian father and son is dreadful. They don't really talk.

CB: And for that reason, I wonder if some audiences might find the film's ending problematic. The boy chooses to stay with the father, even though we have seen how abusive he is. It could be seen as sentimental; the men will be always be together, no matter what. Were you worried about how audiences might react to this?

BA: Yes, I was worried that the ending could glamorize their relationship. Having said that, I should clarify that, for me, the ending is horrible. You don't know when these men might start fighting again. After all, things fluctuate, there are ups and downs. For this reason, I feel that the ending only offers a provisional reconciliation.

CB: The characters are in a precarious situation. They are almost destitute, unable to pay their bills and collecting water from the toilets, while the mother works for a fast food chain. What impact does this have on them?

BA: The environment in the story was based on a real, existing environment. In Banqiao, next to the Mega City department store, you can see a crumbling area with low-rise houses. I think the father and son in *Black Sheep* are living on the outskirts of the city, marginalised. In terms of the father's behaviour, I feel it has something to do with making a comparison. If the people surrounding the father were as poor as him, or possessed equally limited resources, he might not feel so inferior to others. But even though he is adjacent to the city, he gets nothing out of it, and that's why he has this violent reaction.

CB: Were there any particular films or styles that influenced you when making *Black Sheep*?

BA: I have some favourite directors, but of two totally different kinds. First is Michael Haneke. I love his piercing cold – it's a coldness that is a way of calmly looking at the world. And my other favourite is Kore-eda Hirokazu – maybe *Sen Sen* has something in common with his approach. I appreciate the warmth and tenderness of his films. So I like one director who is very cold, and one who is very warm.

CB: When watching *Black Sheep*, I was reminded slightly of *Rebels of the Neon God*. The kids in the arcades, the family deteriorating... was that an influence at all?

BA: I wasn't thinking much about *Rebels of the Neon God*, actually. Interestingly, maybe it's just a pure coincidence, but after the shoot I started to watch and read about director Tsai Ming-Liang's films. He is like a sophisticated and mature architect: he only sketches two lines, but these two lines are so well placed that powerful conflict is created.

CB: Let's move onto *Sen Sen*. The film continues your interest in family issues, but death is central to this film. Why did you choose to make a film about this subject?

BA: I shot *Sen Sen* two years before my dad passed away. I strongly sensed that death was close to me. I think this is the reason.

CB: The character of Yi-An is similar. She's preparing for her mother's death.

BA: Correct. Yi-An is in a similar situation to mine: we are both thirty-something, though she might be slightly older than me. She is caught between her own life and work, and her mother's. She is torn.

CB: How did the actors respond to portraying characters who have to face death? It's a tough script, and I was wondering how they reacted.

BA: The kid didn't react especially. As for Nina Paw and Yi-Wen (who plays Yi-An), their situation was more complicated. This was because Yi-Wen had experienced the death of her father prior to joining the production, and death still felt too close to her. The sorrow was too heavy. She encountered a massive challenge when she played the role; she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to control her emotions, and would mishandle the character.

CB: That must also have been difficult for you as a director.

BA: It's why we had to carefully weigh things up when it came to Yi-Wen. On the other hand, luckily, Nina Paw is an optimistic person. After all, it's rather cruel to ask an elderly person to perform a story about death.

CB: How did Nina Paw come to be involved with the project? She's a big star, so how did you get her on board?

BA: It was easier than I thought (laughs). One day we gave her a call. She answered and said: "Yeah, as long as the timing is good, I'm OK to do it." One thing worth mentioning is that she makes her judgement mainly on the basis of the script. If she feels that the script is good, and she can fit it into her schedule, she'll say yes. I think she liked this script.

CB: Has she made other films in Taiwan? She's based mainly in Hong Kong.

BA: This is her first film shot in Taiwan.

CB: You had a young actor playing Sen, whereas Nina Paw has decades of experience. How, as a director, did you approach this disparity in the actors' experience?

BA: I should begin by saying that Nina's performance isn't achieved using a specific method. By this, I mean it's not like she tells herself "I should act in a certain way." On the contrary, her performance relies on her feelings and senses, for instance, "I feel it like this, like that." It turned out that she was somehow similar to a child. Kids feel things in a similar way: "Ah, I feel this is too bright, oh, I feel this is very hot." So both the actors were like kids. As a result, I only needed to explain things to them by acting them out. For example, with Nina I could easily communicate by saying "I think this feels like such and such." And I could also give her some real examples of things that happen in life. If the boy didn't understand my examples, I would present him with something analogous, something he could understand. Then as a director, I had to act for him, to show him a possible emotion he might feel.

CB: Could you give me an example?

BA: The boy listens to something on a headset on the bus, right? You see his tears and laughter, but actually, what he was listening to was an empty recording. In this example, as it's a scene in which the Granny is going to die, I asked the boy's mother, "Did he ever experience the

death of a pet, or anything like that?” His mother said no. But we kept talking and discovered that she was hospitalised for a while. This is the story I told the boy beforehand, about how his mother had stayed in a hospital, and I asked him to imagine that experience.

CB: The film has an interesting structure. You choose to begin with what is chronologically the last scene - why did you do that?

BA: The opening is in fact a device I used in the script. I remember at the beginning of script development, I was hoping to create a feeling of regret. As for the film’s ending, that was decided during editing. The original edit wasn’t the same as what we have now. Having said that, we were very clear about the direction of my ending, which was to give people hope. This might be hard to explain... but I hope this story starts from death, then ends with birth, like a circle. Yes, like *sheng sheng bu xi*.

CB: Many filmmakers use a setting purely as a backdrop, but you seem interested in the places themselves. The camera spends time lingering on the details of the Granny’s house, for example.

BA: It’s like this. People will have habits because of one romantic relationship, or an experience driving a car. I think leaving a trace is inevitable if you have stayed in one place. That’s why I sometimes feel that the space itself can tell stories. This is how I feel Haneke seems to reflect on something, why his stories can be so simple. It’s all because the environment has told part of the story, and he doesn’t need to make that much effort to elaborate that stuff. I think a minimalist structure, in part, has conveyed some of it.

CB: You’re also interested in cleaning, in objects being moved in and out of spaces. In *Black Sheep*, this is a good thing, as the father puts his drinks bottles away, whereas in *Sen Sen* it connotes death. What does this mean to you?

BA: Cleaning and tidying is important to me, whether that is positive or negative. It means to transform. On the other hand, it’s because my mother worked as a maid when I was a kid, helping people out with the domestic chores, and I saw her cleaning the house quite often. I think this might be the meaning.

CB: There’s lots of technology in the film – a webcast, cellphones, a security video. You seem to suggest that technology offers the characters something positive.

BA: For me, on *Sen Sen*, the meaning of technology is far more positive than negative, since technology leaves lots of evidence. This idea actually came from my personal experience of buying a second-hand desktop from my friend, on which I found lots of his evidence (laughs). I just wondered if human emotions, or anything else, can be preserved via technology.

CB: *Sen* uses the phone as a means of remembering people who have died. How does this compare to more traditional ways of remembering the dead, like visiting a grave?

BA: I might say there is no difference. We’ve just got more ways to do it. I used to dislike pictures being taken of me. As my dad began to get older, my sister started to say “Let’s take a photo!” whenever we hung out together. Afterwards, however, when I understood the purpose behind her taking the photos, I changed my view on this and thought “OK, let’s do this, and we can look at them in the future.”

CB: Yet there are moments in *Sen Sen* when technology is shown to be dangerous, such as the scene in which Sen is listening to the podcast, and gets hit by a car.

BA: I'm currently working on a series, in which I address this topic of technology a bit. It's the speed: information is exploding and moving too fast, which is where I see it as becoming negative and dangerous. I really worry that people have no time to think and feel.

CB: Maybe that explains the pacing of your films. You're telling the audience to slow down.

BA: Exactly! Audiences in Taiwan – or I should say a certain audience, especially the young generation who grew up with technology – don't like to slow down to watch a film.

CB: We never see any character die. Why did you choose not to depict death directly?

BA: I'm very clear about my intention in not showing the Granny's death. We don't want to be cruel. We asked ourselves: who is our audience, and for whom are we making this film? What should they feel after the screening? This led us to consider those who are suffering from cancer, or those who have been through a similar experience. I hope that after they watch this film, they won't just think that life is tough and we should end it now. I'd rather think that *Sen Sen* is a film that addresses the larger theme of hope, not only death.

CB: That does come across, and yet when the boy wanders around the empty house at the end, it's crushing.

BA: (laughs) I guess we will all die one day, sooner or later. As for the very final scene, for me, the reason why I picked the sequence in which Sen and the Granny play badminton is to show that she remains in the boy's mind. Maybe phones can capture the movement and the moment, but the real interaction, and the feeling derived from it, stays inside the kid, vividly ingrained in his mind and heart. I'd like to think this offers some hope.

CB: Both of your films ultimately offer quite a hopeful view of inter-generational relationships. Was that intentional?

BA: When making these two films, I did think about this. Especially in *Black Sheep*, the film is really about communication between the generations, particularly in the Taiwanese cultural context. As far as *Sen Sen* is concerned, the original motivation for making the film was this: I wanted to make a film that discussed death, for kids in Taiwan. As we all know, Asian parents don't talk about death with their kids, due to superstition – they believe that talking about this topic could bring bad luck. So can there be other ways to communicate? Now that I consider these two films from the perspective of your question, maybe they were both made to find new ways for everyone to communicate.

CB: Do you know any kids who have watched *Sen Sen*? What were their reactions?

BA: *Sen Sen* screened at a children's film festival. I strongly sensed that the kids, after the screening, realized that that'd better say "I love you" as soon as possible. If they do this, then it would definitely be an improvement on my generation. I feel that the central message *Sen*

Sen tries to convey is that we need to express how we feel, that we shouldn't restrain it, like in *Black Sheep*.

CB: What did audiences make of the film more generally? Did they react in the way you expected?

BA: On our tour, the first few screenings we went to were at care homes. We asked the residents whether they considered Yi-An to be a good daughter. This was because our crew felt that the way she scolds her mother is bad, and does not correspond to our sense of filial piety. But to our surprise, these pensioners didn't agree with this point of view! They all thought Yi-An was a great daughter. Here I saw something interesting, that parents can actually be very thoughtful towards their children, to the extent that they're willing to make all sorts of excuses. But in the majority of exchanges we had after screenings, people approached us and said "my family has had the same kind of experience," or spoke about the process of facing death.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Luc Sung Yu-lun for the translation of this interview. Images are reproduced with the kind permission of the filmmaker.

Images

The filmmaker has given permission for these to be reproduced:

Image 1: Bon An (centre) directs Nina Paw (right) and Wu Zhi-xuan (left) on the set of *Sen Sen*.

Image 2: Lau Ming (Han Chang) carries a door through the streets in *Black Sheep*.

Image 3: Lau Chi-ping (Pan Chin-yu) and his father Lau Ming (Han Chang) experience the disintegration of their home.

Image 4: Lau Chi-ping (Pan Chin-yu) feels trapped and seeks to escape from his father.

Image 5: Granny (Nina Paw) begins a webcast in *Sen Sen*.

Image 6: Sen (Wu Zhi-xuan) mourns the loss of his brother.

Image 7: Sen and Granny play badminton.

¹ See, for example, Kuei-fen Chiu, Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley & Gary D. Rawnsley (eds.), *Taiwan Cinema: International Reception and Social Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Song-Hwee Lim, "Taiwan New Cinema: Small nation with soft power" in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, Carlos Rojas & Eileen Chow, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 152-169.