



Probing lens: Sherman Ong (right) built up a commendable repertoire of films, short films and documentaries from the early 2000s onwards, such as *Exodus* (above). PHOTOS: SHERMAN ONG

Zooming in on identity in celluloid

By CHEAH UI-HOON

FOR Sherman Ong, one of the key problems with Singapore films is a lack of real identity, not filmmakers. Specifically, it's the government's emphasis on "no dialect" and "speak good English" policy which hinders filmmakers from portraying the real Singapore.

This unease and discomfort with language is holding back Singapore film, says the independent filmmaker who's probably better known in the international independent film circuit than in Singapore.

Ong, 41, a law graduate from the National University of Singapore, got his head start as a photographer in the mid-1990s, but started building up a commendable repertoire of films, short films and documentaries from the early 2000s onwards. This was a time when indie filmmaking was still a novel concept in Singapore.

Since then, Ong has probably spent as much time abroad as he has in Singapore, either filming or showing them in international film festivals.

Excerpts from his film *Tickets*, which was part of the award-winning 2009 Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, was shown at a forum organised by Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences earlier this week, entitled *Producing Chinese Cinema in the 21st Century*.

"How have our migrations led to our identities and how do we project ourselves in the international market and audience," questions Ong, who was on the panel discussing Singapore film.

The question of identity forms the crux of Ong's filmmaking. He grew up in a Peranakan household in Malacca, speaking Peranakan Malay, but went to Chinese kindergarten, and later, pitched headlong into Hwa Chong Junior College's "culture" after completing his 'O' Levels in Malaysian schools.

"What preoccupies me is growing up Peranakan – being a Chinese who barely speaks Mandarin," he muses. As he sees it, Peranakans were essen-

tially bicultural but who identified themselves as Chinese because of political and social circumstances.

His first introduction into the world of film was through his grandfather, he recounts, who was a projectionist at The Sun cinema in Malacca. "When I was a kid, I'd watch two Hong Kong films a week. And then my grandaunt would take us to the Chinese operas performing at temples. When I was 10, my dad gave me a camera, and that started me on my relationship with images," Ong sums up.

Self-starter

Everything about photography he learnt "on the job" - from the days where he volunteered to photograph events for Raffles Hall activities in NUS. And the same with film. A pivotal moment was volunteering in the Singapore International Film Festival, in its heyday in the mid-1990s.

That was Ong's introduction to world cinema and he later worked as a producer/director at Mediacorp, took an advanced diploma course in cinematography, and continued to hone his craft through the ubiquitous corporate video.

"In the early 2000s, filmmakers like myself would just develop our craft based on what we could do and what we watched... there was no real film school," he shares. But one documentary led to another, especially as Ong started picking up awards – such as the one he did for a heritage festival in Singapore which won a Malaysian video award.

A 2003 film on Indonesian dance, *Exodus*, opened the Rotterdam Film Festival, and from there it snowballed. In a 2005 residency in Hanoi, Ong created his Hanoi Haiku series – merging his photography and film practices.

"The artists' residency was a mental shift – as it made me think harder of what I was trying to say through my photography and film."

Another residency at the Fukuoka Art Museum led him to make his first feature film in Japanese, and then the

film *Flooding in the Time of Drought* for the 2011 Singapore Biennale, which again focused on migrant stories. Ong was in Berlin last month, where *Flooding* showed at the Asia Pacific Week Berlin 2013.

There's been a strong momentum for filmmaking in Singapore in the last five years, notes Ong, but it goes back to the identity Singapore is projecting on the global stage. "This inevitably affects how film as a product is viewed." It's also a question of how relevant the films are to the international community.

"There's also confusion as to how we're using film as a revenue source or as a cultural expression and these two overlap in different places."

Ong's idea of film is that it has to deal with authenticity, which means allowing Singaporeans to speak naturally. "The unique selling point is that we speak Singlish, this creole language, which happens in Malaysia and the Philippines as well. We don't speak pure English, nor do we speak pure Chinese, so until and unless we embrace and feel confident about Singlish, we'll always have a schizophrenic nature."

Some of the best works on Singapore are short films and clips uploaded on YouTube, he quips, because they're authentic and also quintessentially Singaporean.

The biggest barrier to Singapore film now is language, feels Ong, because it shows we're not comfortable with our bodies until we are with our language.

Sherman Ong is currently holding a workshop with hearing impaired students for the Abilities in Diversity Art Programme organised by the Community Foundation of Singapore, which will culminate in a September exhibition and is mentoring budding photographers for the Asean youth camp in end-August. He will take part in Video Brasil and the Copenhagen International Documentary Festival in November