

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

WET SEASON

A FILM BY
ANTHONY CHEN

Starring Yeo Yann Yann and Koh Jia Ler

PRESS NOTES

*OFFICIAL SELECTION
Toronto International Film Festival 2019*

Country of Origin: Singapore, Taiwan
Format: DCP/2.39/Color
Sound: 5.1 Surround
Running Time: 103 minutes
Genre: Drama
Not Rated
In Chinese & English With English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

It is monsoon season in Singapore and the city is pouring with rain.

Wet Season follows the plight of Ling, a Chinese language teacher, whose marriage and school life are fraying apart because she is unable to bear a child. But an unlikely friendship with a student helps her reaffirm her identity as a woman.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT | ANTHONY CHEN

I have always been interested in exploring female characters. In my debut feature *Ilo Ilo*, I was examining motherhood and maternal instinct. *Wet Season* takes this exploration of female identity a step further.

The idea of a woman approaching her forties desperate to have a child of her own sunk into my head. On the page, I have described her as “having an elegant, almost motherly presence, but she is not a mother.” This is the woman I have since been obsessed with, one who loses herself under the pressures of straddling the expectations of a modern working-woman and dutiful wife.

For me, *Wet Season* is a delicate portrait of a woman, not recognised in her marriage nor at work, on a journey to redefine and rediscover herself. My protagonist Ling is not a victim of her own fate. There is a silent resilience in her as she battles through life with dignity and grace.

In the past few years, this project has connected with me in more personal ways than ever as my wife and I deal with our own challenges of starting a family. The injections, the pills, the hospital visits; tears, anger, disappointment, these are now familiar rituals I have borne witness to. Despite the pains and struggles, the experience has reaffirmed my determination to realise this film.

INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY CHEN

Q: *Wet Season* focuses on the plight of Ling whose needs and desires seem secondary to supporting those around her. Can you tell us what inspired you to tell the story of this particular woman?

A: I have always been interested in exploring female characters. In my first feature *Ilo Ilo*, it was very much about examining motherhood and maternal instinct. *Wet Season* continues this exploration of female identity. Somehow, the idea of a woman approaching her forties desperate to have a child of her own spunk into my head and I have since been obsessed by this woman losing herself under the pressures of straddling the expectations of a modern working-woman and dutiful wife.

All the films I have made have always been personal in some way or other. While developing *Wet Season*, Ling's desire to have a child oddly mirrors my own experience of trying to start a family with my wife. The desperation and pain, resilience and determination of Ling is something I have observed and greatly empathise with.

Q: We think about Singapore as a modern, open and international country, however, Ling's character is marginalised in many ways, not just as a woman but also an immigrant and wife.

A: As much as we strive to progress towards a classless society, it seems everywhere in the world, even in Singapore there are invisible lines that divide people based on status, background and class.

There has always been a certain sense of elitism amongst the English-educated and English-speaking group. In today's Singapore, the wave of new migrants from China have also seen Singaporeans separate themselves through their command of English.

I have always been very sensitive to the notion of class and background in real life and in my work. This detailing has always been a huge part of my filmmaking - the way people speak, look and conduct themselves says so much about where they come from and the values they hold.

Q: Ling is a Chinese teacher, a subject often portrayed in the film as of lesser importance which is sometimes used as a way of undermining Ling's authority. Is this a reflection of how things are in the school system in Singapore?

A: In Singapore, there has been a lot of Chinese teachers in schools in Singapore coming from Malaysia, due to the higher wages and better prospects in Singapore. Most of them are educated in Malaysia and then Taiwan. These days, many hail from China. As most of these Chinese language teachers are generally Chinese-educated and not fluent in English, they are being seen as being less adept at administrative paperwork and are less likely to rise up the ranks to take on larger responsibilities and positions within the school system. Nowadays, the current generation of youths are so anglicised that they no longer view Chinese as being important at all. This is despite Chinese being a compulsory subject for all ethnically Chinese Singaporeans.

Q: Can you tell us a little about the wet season itself? How long is it, how does it change the city and its mood, why did it inspire you?

A: Singapore is a tropical island that sits on the equator. We don't have seasons and it's summery all year round, except during the monsoon season, which takes place for around two months usually towards the end of the year. During the rainy season, we get long durations of rain, and it gets very wet. In recent years, we have even had floods, a rare occurrence in Singapore. I have always found rain poetic and cinematic. Particularly for this story, it paints the emotional landscape of not just the film, but the character of Ling.

Rain as an element was very much written into the script from the very start.

Q: Shooting in the rain is notoriously difficult and unpredictable. Can you tell us how you managed to overcome some of the technical challenges on set?

A: It was only when our team was planning the rain scenes when we realised how daunting it is. We originally thought of using VFX for many of the complicated rain scenes, however we soon realised our independent film budget couldn't quite stretch to cover it and rain and water effects using CGI are complicated to pull off in a realist film like ours. In the end, a hundred percent of the rain in the film was created via practical effects. Rain effects are not an area of expertise that is well developed in Singapore, but we are thankful that we were supported by a committed and passionate art team who did multiple tests to perfect the rain we wanted.

Most people do not know this, but Singapore does not have its own supply of water and buys a huge part of its water needs from Malaysia. Hence, water is expensive in Singapore and that

limits the quantity of water we have for each rain scene and many a times we would all be panicking when we were down to the last tank of water.

Q: In *Wet Season* you are reuniting with the actors Yann Yann and Jia Ler who also played your main protagonists in *Ilo Ilo*. Can you tell us why you decided to work with them again?

It was not part of the plan at all. Like in *Ilo Ilo*, I spent a long period of over one and half years working with my casting team in search of a fresh face to play the 16-year-old student in *Wet Season*. We saw hundreds of boys and did a year-long workshop with a group of shortlisted boys. We couldn't quite find our ideal teenager, and I chanced upon a recent photo of Jia Ler on instagram and decided to throw him into the mix. He sparkled immediately and the entire team knew right away he was the one to play Wei Lun. Jia Ler has grown up so much in 6 years, but his natural flair for performance and rhythm continues to flourish.

Because we decided on Wei Lun, I was really reluctant to even consider Yann Yann for the part of Ling. We explored all options but still couldn't find our perfect Ling. In the end, we decided to bring Yann Yann in and we screen tested a few scenes. Ling is a huge departure from all the roles Yann Yann has played in the past, and a character that is poles apart from her in real life. We both knew it was going to be a challenge and we worked hard together to bring Ling to life. The groundwork was laid by changing her physically through imaging, hair and makeup.

I have known Yann Yann for over 13 years, we first worked together on my short *Ah Ma* (Cannes 2007) before *Ilo Ilo*, and we have been good friends ever since. This is both a blessing and a curse as we know each other too well. The experience has been one that is emotional, sometimes even painful, and eventually rewarding for both of us. For Jia Ler, there was an awkwardness that he had to bridge working on this film. *Ilo Ilo* was his on screen debut and he got really close to Yann Yann as a result, addressing her as "Mummy" even to this day. At some point, I had to set up a ground rule so that he never addresses her that way on set. It was difficult for them I observed, especially in the intimacy scenes, but they dealt with things in a very professional way. I have a lot of love for the two of them, both on screen and off screen.

Q: Wei Lun's growing interest and desire in his teacher could be seen as both an adolescent crush but also a manifestation of his loneliness and isolation from his parents. How do you see their relationship?

A: Human relationships are always more complex than we think they are. The lines really do blur in terms of the relationship between Wei Lun and his teacher. Is Ling a lover or a replacement mother? Is Wei Lun a replacement for her absentee husband or the son she has always wanted? I always felt that our emotions tend to lead us to places we never thought possible. This ambiguity in human connections and bonds has always and still intrigue me.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY | ANTHONY CHEN

Anthony Chen is a writer-director and producer from Singapore. Anthony started film school at the young age of 17 to pursue his passion in filmmaking. Trained at film school in Singapore and

then at the National Film and Television School, U.K., his shorts have screened and been awarded at numerous prestigious festivals including Cannes, Berlin, Rotterdam, Busan, London, Sydney, Melbourne, and Chicago.

He is best known for his debut feature *Ilo Ilo* which premiered at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival and was awarded the Camera d'Or. The film went on to win forty awards internationally, including the Sutherland Award at BFI London Film Festival, and four Golden Horse Awards at the 50th Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan.

He is now based in London, UK where he lives with his wife and son.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2019** *Wet Season* – Director, Writer
- 2013** *Ilo Ilo* – Director, Writer
Camera d'Or Winner, Cannes Film Festival
- 2012** *Karung Guni* (short) - Director, Writer
- 2011** *The Reunion Dinner* (Short) - Director, Writer
- 2010** *Lighthouse* (Short) – Director, Writer
- 2010** *Hotel 66* (Short) – Director, Writer
- 2008** *Haze* (Short) – Director, Writer
- 2007** *Grandma* (Short) – Director, Writer
Special Mention, Cannes Film Festival
- 2005** *G-23* (Short) – Director, Writer

GIRAFFE PICTURES | PRODUCTION COMPANY

- 2019** *Wet Season* – Producer
- 2017** *Pop Aye* – Executive Producer
- 2016** *Distance* – Writer, Executive Producer

CAST

**Ling
Andrew
Wei Lun
Father-in-law**

Yeo Yann Yann
Christopher Lee
Koh Jia Ler
Yang Shi Bin

CREW

**Written and Directed by
Executive Producers**

Anthony Chen
Des Tan
Meng Xie
Peter Bithos
Jennifer Batty
Bryan Seah
Jianbin Zhang
Leong Sze Hian
Gina Lau

Produced by

Anthony Chen
Huang Wenhong
Tan Si En

Director of Photography

Art Director

Edited by

Sam Care (UK)
Soon Yong Chow (Malaysia)
Hoping Chen (Taiwan)
Joanne Cheong (Singapore)

Sound by

Ko Li Chi (Taiwan)
Zhe Wu (UK)

Assistant Director

Casting Director

Production Manager

Charlotte Lim (Malaysia)
Koo Chia Meng
Irene Kung

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