

Cue for a cure

When Thai officials shut down his directorial debut, Bill Yip Kim-fung discovered he had another film in him after all, writes **Clarence Tsui**

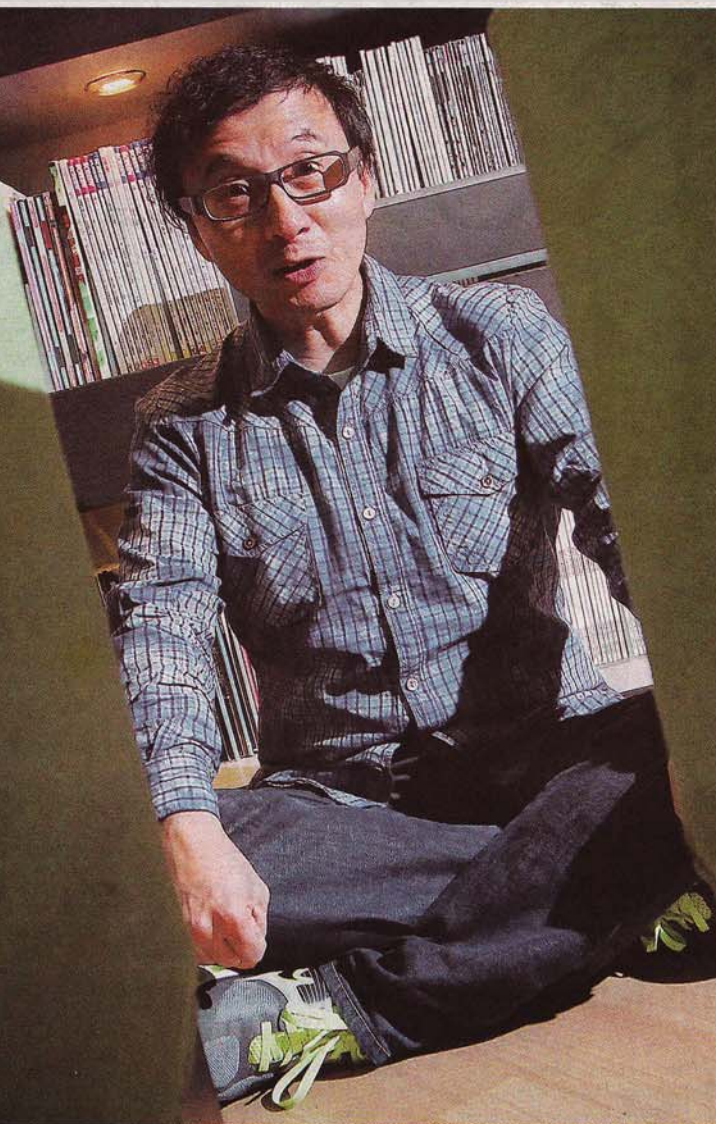


Photo: Felix Wong

When Bill Yip Kim-fung arrived in Bangkok in April 2009, he was within reach of the one goal which had eluded him since he graduated from Hong Kong Baptist College's film department in the mid-1980s.

Having spent the past two decades working as screenwriter, assistant director, and production manager on other people's films – with spells directing RTHK dramas and advertisements thrown in for good measure – Yip was finally ready to make *City of Angels*, a full-fledged feature set in Thailand.

Then came the bad news: the Thai authorities had vetoed his project, saying his story would paint the country in an unappealing light. "It was the child prostitution which drew their ire," Yip says of the element which drove the story, about an illiterate fisherman's attempt to rescue the young daughter he unwittingly sold to a German man living in the Thai capital.

"It's not as if our story would have shown the sex explicitly – the film's just about this man's efforts to get his daughter back," Yip says. "But the officials simply didn't like foreigners going in and talking about these things. They were saying, why couldn't the girl end up at a sweatshop, maybe?"

Sipping his coffee at a café in the Broadway Cinematheque, Yip can now recount the episode calmly – he even claims to understand why the Thai officials torpedoed his film, saying he "wouldn't blame them for

protecting their national integrity". But he also readily admits he was devastated then, with his plans in tatters and his directorial debut ended before it had even begun.

"I was more inclined to just leave then – it was simply too much of a disappointment to take in," says Yip, who was forced to abandon the set his crew had built in a village in southern Thailand and the many local actors he had cast for the film. "My two production designers said they'd go for a walk to let me think of a way out. When they came back, we started to talk, and a bell rang – there was this man delivering big boxes of souvenirs they had bought. They thought I'd be leaving for sure, and went shopping!"

But the mementos had to wait. Left alone in his room, Yip had found his way out.

Rather than leaving Bangkok as a failed filmmaker on a plane, he would depart from the city by land with guns blazing – metaphorically speaking, that is. Using his wish to escape as a building block, Yip came up with the idea of a road movie in which a con man called New (played by Makara Supinacharoen) travels from the capital to his home village in the northern borderlands to atone for his past misdemeanours. And from this, *Cure* was born.

Having junked his original plan, Yip was left with a skeletal crew of eight to nine people, cast and crew included. "This got us the mobility we needed for this kind of film," he says.

The guerilla-style filmmaking shows in *Cure*, and sometimes in a

good way – such as during the opening scenes, when New is seen planning his scams in a city mired in chaos. And that's real chaos, as Yip and his team were shooting those scenes while Bangkok was in virtual lockdown during the confrontation between the government and the supporters of ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

While Yip was annoyed that his new idea was nearly scuppered by the protests, he also realised the political circumstances provided *Cure* with an additional layer of meaning. Yip says it's not coincidental that the colour red is used to symbolise lies throughout the film, from the red tablets New hawks to his customers, to the red décor of the hotel run by a young woman, Poo (Siriwan Khankham).

"The red shirts were driven by lies," Yip says of the protesters who wrought havoc in Bangkok last summer. "I saw how it was basically a piece of theatre. You saw politicians going on stage and

showing people bullet-riddled tyres and they could barely suppress their own giggles. And why were so many people gathering around them every day? Because they were giving out food and stuff, and bringing pop stars in to perform, and people just went there for want of anything better to do," Yip says.

It was an ominous start to a challenging two-month shoot across Thailand. As the crew made their way northwards – with Yip developing the story along the way – they survived a car crash and, according to Yip, the hostile reaction of the Myanmar army when they clandestinely filmed a scene in Myanmar.

A year later, *Cure* has been screened in two film festivals in Hong Kong, and is now on limited release at the Broadway Cinematheque. Yip says it has been an exciting ride, albeit a costly one: he had to sell his apartment, his stocks and his gold to finance the project, which eventually cost him HK\$2 million, he says. "I've got another producer to fall back on, but I'd rather not involve other people's money if I could deal with it with my own," says Yip, laughing.

At least he now has a film to call his own, after spending the first decade of his career as an assistant director and screenwriter for Leong Po-chih (*Shanghai 1920*) and Lawrence Lau Kwok-cheung (on films such as *Gangs*, *Queen of Temple Street*, *The Boxer*, and *Three Summers*), and directing a few RTHK television dramas.

In 1997, Yip left the film industry

to become associate creative director at Bentley Porter Novelli's Hong Kong bureau and then a director of creative solutions for MediaMix. He then founded his own production house, presiding over the making of TV commercials and corporate videos.

It wasn't the most gratifying of times, he now says. "I was so worried people would spot me walking around in Central wearing a suit. I'm more comfortable with lunchboxes than lavish lunches – now I consider that as my transition period to something else."

In 2005, he went to study new media at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. It was during that sabbatical that he rediscovered his desire to make films – and when he began planning for that fishing-village drama.

"I've been talking about that film for so long, it's as if I've already made it," he says of the aborted *City of Angels*. "Who knows, maybe I'll get to make that one day."

For the time being, Yip – who works as a part-time lecturer in filmmaking at the City University Hong Kong's School of Continuing and Professional Education – is hatching an idea set closer to home: a film about Cantonese opera actors in Hong Kong. "I'd rather be making something here as my next project," says Yip, laughing.

It remains to be seen whether he can find his city of angels here anytime soon.

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Cure is screening now



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BILL YIP RECALLING THE CANCELLATION OF HIS CITY OF ANGELS PROJECT