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# DANIEL YUN: JOURNEY OF A SINGAPOREAN FILMMAKER

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*A single-minded focus of being the best drove and defined the former boss of MediaCorp Raintree Pictures*

During last year's mid-autumn festival (中秋节), a day when ethnic Chinese worldwide celebrate what is also called Mooncake festival by gathering with family and eating sweet moon-shaped pastry, **Daniel Yun** stood alone atop one of the dozens peaks of the Yellow Mountains (黄山) in the Eastern Chinese province of Anhui (安徽). The veteran media executive gazed out over the giant boulders that had poked through the sea of clouds, exhaled, and took in the view that had inspired generations of poets, painters, and artists of every description.

Just weeks prior, Yun had released the film *1965* days ahead of Singapore's 50<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary on August 9th. Film critics panned it, calling it a propaganda piece. Box office takings, totalling about S\$700,000 in its seven-week run, were a fraction of its S\$2.8 million budget. Ancillary sales are ongoing.

"For me, I put in over five years of my life into *1965*, and why is the reception like this?" Yun tells *Perspectives @SMU*. "At the top of the mountain, I thought I would have an epiphany; I didn't." He pauses before adding, "What really struck me was this idea that I am entitled some level of success, achievement, joy, happiness if I worked hard. A sense of entitlement."

## EXPECTATIONS AND ENTITLEMENT

In a cold, windowless meeting room where *Perspectives @SMU* spoke to the trim 57-year-old, Yun makes clear that he does not expect to get something for doing nothing. Yun's film industry reputation as a hard-driving producer is proof positive of that claim, but the grizzled movie executive also expects commensurate rewards for effort expended.

"I always thought if I worked hard, if I invested time and effort, if I put in all my energies and my attention, then I am entitled to success," he elaborates. "For example, *1965* – all my hard work, the effort from the entire team, for over five years; we should be entitled to the kind of success that is in proportion to the kind of effort we put in."

“Staying in Anhui away from Singapore, and in some ways away from my life and seeing it from afar, I realised this sense of entitlement may be the cause of my temper, my sadness, my disappointment and my disillusionment.”

Yun’s short fuse – “My temper was legendary!” – was folklore at MediaCorp Raintree Pictures, the now defunct movie production arm of Singapore’s national broadcaster, MediaCorp. In his 12-year reign as CEO, staff would come and go – “Some couldn’t take it for even one week” – while others got “weather reports” from his secretary before venturing into his office.

“All my life, I wanted to be the best professional,” Yun explains. “I want to be the most professional executive there is. I want to be the one with the most integrity and what have you – I want to be the best. I strived to be that. I got angry because of that,” he blurts leaning forward, barely able to contain both his frustration and desire to express it. “It’s about, ‘Why isn’t it the best?’ I’m not angry at you, I’m just angry and you happen to get the brunt of it. It can’t just be this! It’s got to be better than this!”

That Yun was driven was clear for all to see. From 1998 when he was roped in to start Raintree, Yun cranked out some 30 films with 2007 and 2008 each yielding five titles. To put that into context: Disney produced nine and ten titles in those years, while the entire Hong Kong film industry produced 27 in 2007. Raintree released just one film after his departure in 2009, and has since ceased operations.

His temper nearly stopped the filming of *One Last Dance* (2006), which starred big-name Hong Kong actors Francis Ng (吴镇宇) and Ti Lung (狄龙), Taiwanese actress Vivian Hsu (徐若瑄), Oscar-nominated Harvey Keitel and Singaporean actors such as Chen Tianwen (陈天文) and Hossan Leong. Yun heard whisperings of preferential treatment against the Singaporeans on the production crew, setting him off.

“I went to the set where everyone was eating chicken rice, and I threw a can of coke on the floor,” recounts Yun of the incident he calls the “chicken rice war”, which incidentally is the title of an earlier Raintree film. “The director (Max Makowski) stood up and we argued. And then he ran off.

“(Co-producer) Peter Loehr, who was in Beijing at that time, called to ask, ‘What happened? Never mind, I’ll talk to you later, the director’s running off to the airport.’ That night we all sat down and we laughed about it.

“Everyone knows it’s not personal - it is about wanting the best for a situation, or wanting to be better, especially for something important.”

It is something Yun is acutely aware of, but he likens it to a “beast” that is beyond control when provoked.

“There are days when I reflect on being angry, and I tell myself, ‘Daniel, you really have to draw the curtains and shut yourself away because what you did was so wrong.’ And I find myself talking to myself: Would I do it to the Chairman of Mediacorp or the Prime Minister? Probably not.

“When something is important, it comes out, this beast.”

## Growing pains

Yun traces his competitive, perfectionist streak back to his childhood in a *kampung* – the Malay word for “village” – off Geylang Road in an area in eastern Singapore that is better known these

days as a red-light and late-night dining district. Yun's father, a cook, could afford to pay for the 30-cent trishaw ride home from the main road, but there was precious little to spare.

"My parents were immigrants, and life was tough. They were trying their best to get by, and they made me very, very driven. I think a lot of my temper has to do with: You have to be the best, otherwise you'll be on the streets; your neighbours are all looking down on you so you better make something of yourself. It was drilled into me that I had to go for it."

After graduating from one of the premier boys' schools, Victoria School, the ambitious young man got a job as a Man Friday at an ad agency before becoming an FA (Finished Artwork) artist. In the late 1980s Yun set up his own advertising agency, Channel Marketing, thereby fulfilling a childhood ambition of becoming his own boss by 30 years old.

From there, he went on to turn around the radio operations at Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (which later became MediaCorp) as the first VP without a degree in 1991. By creating the Marcom Division and introducing the culture of promoting and marketing TV stars, Yun, in effect, injected a dose of pizzazz into what had been a de facto statutory body.

But when he left Raintree, he felt keenly the need to do the one thing missing from his impressive CV.

"I skirted around," Yun explains, referring to being near the creative process but never actually driving it. "When I went into advertising, very soon I was no longer in the creative process – I was in account servicing, and then running the agency. In radio I was never the DJ, I was the programmer or sales or in MarComm (marketing communications), and it was the same in TV where I was never in production but instead in sales and MarComm and programming.

"In the movies I was never the writer or director until recently. It's hardwired in me, it's conditioned in me to consider so many things. That's what I also do, even in 1965 – I considered the market, I considered this and that."

## 1965 and its lessons

As co-writer, co-producer, and co-director Yun had plenty to mull over. The film set and events depicted has to be historically correct, but Yun felt it got in the way of storytelling.

"If you dispense with that and tell a more human story, I think that would put less pressure on the story, and maybe it could be a better film," Yun says. "At one time, the presence of Lee Kuan Yew in 1965 was just going to be historical footage of him. I made the decision with my director and co-producers at MM2 Entertainment that it shouldn't be, and (Lim) Kay Tong came into the picture. Is it the right decision? People thought the whole film was about Lee Kuan Yew however much I communicated otherwise.

"In a way I took a beating. Along with me, my crew, my director and producing company invested so much time and effort into it, and it didn't do as well as we had hoped. We lost money."

Like every Singapore movie, *1965* faced the David-versus-Goliath nature of the exhibitor/distributor/producer box office economics. For every dollar a movie generates at the box office, 40 percent goes to the cinema operator. Of the remaining 60 percent, 15 percent goes to the movie's distributor and seven percent goes to pay the Goods and Services Tax (GST). As a result, film producers generally get a third of gross ticket sales.

There was also the added challenge of going head-to-head with two Hollywood summer blockbusters: Tom Cruise's *Mission Impossible – Rogue Nation* and *Fantastic Four*.

“Because Singaporeans are piped into the mainstream English-language culture, they know about big-budget movies even before they come to Singapore. Between *Mission Impossible* and *1965*, the choice is clear to a lot of people.

“The point is: For local films, the minute ticket sales aren’t doing well, the number of screens allocated start to come down. It’s the same with films by big studios but there is a safety net because they have leverage.

“If I’m UIP or Warner Brothers, I can say, ‘How can you treat me this way? Do you want my *Mission Impossible 3*? You think you can afford not to have *The Avengers*? Can you afford not to have this upcoming movie that everyone is talking about called *The 50 shades of Grey*? You know what, let’s give and take.’ Local filmmakers don’t have that leverage at all.”

He adds, “(Cinema operators’) take on local filmmakers is: ‘Why would I want to deal with you when your film is just bread and butter for me? I can have other movies i.e. Hollywood blockbusters that are bread and butter plus champagne. I’m doing you a favour by screening your film, you know? I’ll pay for the P&A (promotion and advertising) dollars first but I’m not sure your revenues are enough to cover the costs; I need you to give me a deposit.’”

## Looking back...and ahead

Now leading less of a corporate life, Yun goes for a run in the morning three times a week – “at least five kilometres, usually seven” – before a breakfast of coffee and toast. Between setting up a new venture with a film fund for a slate of movies and matching actors with businesses within and outside of showbiz, as well as developing an animated film project and the storyline for a film to be shot in Singapore’s Little India district, Yun has simplified his life.

“I sold my house a few years ago, and recently bought a smaller place, an apartment – I feel I can be financially more independent,” Yun reveals, referring to his old abode which hosted local and overseas celebrities. The bachelor had sold his house where he stayed with his mother, who passed away weeks before the premiere of *1965*.

“At one point I was telling the *1965* team and friends who are close to me that I have this feeling she would not live to see the film at our gala. A seat had been reserved for her. She goes to most of my galas.”

The loss of his mother and *1965*’s underwhelming performance had sent Yun flying off to the serenity of the Yellow Mountains. While there was to be no epiphany at the summit, all became clear en route to Singapore: “Success is not guaranteed by hard work. Achievements cannot be measured by the inputs of effort.”

“When I realised this – it was liberating and it freed me,” Yun says. “And in a big way, it makes me a lot less angry with the world, with my work and with myself. My sense of entitlement created expectations in life. Once I realised that the folly of this sense of entitlement, my expectations in life changed and I gained new insights.”

After a career that has taken Daniel Yun the movie producer around the world many times over, what lessons have Daniel Yun the man learnt?

“I feel that to be yourself, whether we are referring to pursuing a creative career route, you need courage,” he says. “You may consider as much as you like, but there must be a time when you need to put all these considerations aside and face up to yourself: Who you are and who you can be. It is really all about the courage to look yourself squarely in the eye.”

“If I’m advising a young person, I would say: Have courage, be brave, follow your heart. It is easier said, but whatever it is, it won’t be that bad...” he trails off before concluding: “And when it gets too much, you go to the mountains.”