

Always on his mind



"SAYANG, bila kamu nak buat filem? (When are you going to make a film, dear?)" the late director Yasmin Ahmad would always ask Chong Keat Aun, then a radio deejay, every time they met.

"Yes, that's what she would always call me, 'Sayang,'" Chong remembers Yasmin's kind, caring voice like it was just yesterday in an interview with StarLifestyle. However, Chong would always reply that he wasn't ready yet.

Their friendship began in 2006 when Chong was a radio deejay, helming the film critique segment of a local radio station. He would often invite the Sepet director over to share her thoughts.

"We started becoming friends after a while and after she learned about my passion for filmmaking; she always encouraged me to pursue it. She wasn't only a teacher to me, she was my biggest motivator."

Chong finally decided to work on writing his first film, *The Story Of Southern Islet*, in 2009.

"It took about two to three months to write it. Unfortunately, just one week after I finally completed the first draft, Yasmin passed away. She never got to read the script."

TURN TO PAGE 3> FROM PAGE 1

More than a decade later, on Nov 21, Chong stood on the prestigious Golden Horse Award stage in Taipei, Taiwan, to receive the Best New Director trophy for his feature film debut, *The Story Of Southern Islet*, which was finally completed last year.

Chong never forgot Yasmin who spurred him on all those years ago and made sure to let



the audience – comprising the creme de la creme of the Chinese film industry – know, paying tribute to the late director in his acceptance speech.

The legend of Gunung Keriang

Set in Kedah, Southern Islet, which was also nominated for Best Original Screenplay, tells the story of a woman in search of a cure for her husband who wakes up one day and coughs out nails.

After meeting numerous bomohs along the way, her search leads her to Gunung Keriang, where she meets a mythical princess who's willing to help rid her husband of the curse.

This leg of the film incorporates the Gunung Keriang folklore known to many locals.

"The story goes that a princess had come by ship to Kedah one day. A strange mythical creature called Gedembai, who rode on an elephant, wanted to marry the princess but she refused," Chong recounts the tale.

"So the creature instructed the elephant to suck up the water in the ocean so the princess couldn't leave. He then turned both the elephant and the princess into stone."

The 42-year-old, who grew up in Kedah, said the film starring Season Chee, Pearly Chua, Jojo Goh, Mei-Sim Hoon and Ling Tang was partly inspired by his childhood there. "About 60% of the film is based on reality and 40% is fantasy," he shares.

After graduating from university with a major in film and TV, Chong honed his craft in various fields in the creative industry.

"My first job was a film editor, then I became a reporter for a Chinese newspaper, and then I became a director for documentary shows. My fourth job, I was a radio deejay for 12 years."

On top of working at diverse art fields by day, Chong is also an activist, working tirelessly to preserve Malaysia's cultural heritage.

Chong has fought for the preservation of various Chinese dialects which sees him spending his own time and money to go to villages all over Malaysia and interview old folks and record their stories, poems and opera folk songs.

These groups include Teochew, Fuzhounese, Hokkien, Hainanese, Hakka, Cantonese, Guangxi and Shan Jiang.

That's not all. Chong has also spent the past 15 years to preserve Petaling Street.

Grounded in reality

The stories that he picked up along the way have in turn inspired the stories of his films.

"When I write a film, the characters are not from my imagination. These are real people with real experiences. I merely change their names, where they lived and so forth."

Chong believes in telling stories that are grounded in reality, even if it means taking a lot of time and research before he can finally come up with a film.

"I'm not lucky," he comments on his recent achievement at the Golden Horse Awards (often regarded as the Chinese Oscars) at his first attempt. "There was a lot of hard work that went into it."

Even Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon director Ang Lee who saw Southern Islet took notice, telling Chong the film had an "interesting and enchanting story" besides praising



the cast's acting performances and cinematography.

A few days prior to his Golden Horse win, Southern Islet also bagged other prizes including the FIPRESCI Prize from The International Federation of Film Critics, personally presented by Ang Lee, Best Film at the Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema (Netpac) and the Observation Missions for Asian Cinema Award. It also walked away with Best Film at the Istanbul Film Awards last September.

It's no surprise then that his next film, Snow In Midsummer, will be based on the real life story of a Cantonese opera troupe based in Malaysia – a product of the wealth of interviews he has conducted on the matter over the years.

His sophomore feature, which is in the last leg of the scripting process, even earned the CNC Cash Award from France's Centre National Du Cinema Et De L'image Animee, awarding Chong with €8,000 (RM38,890) to fund the film.

Asked what Yasmin would think about Southern Islet if she was alive to see it today, Chong says he doesn't know.

"After mentioning Yasmin in my acceptance speech, her sister Orked messaged me to thank me for always remembering Yasmin," he shares, moved by Orked's gesture.

But Chong, who visits Yasmin's grave every year, is not done showing his appreciation for Yasmin just yet.

"I've invited Orked to visit Yasmin's grave with me. This time, I will be bringing the Golden Horse trophy and certificate with me. I want to thank her there personally."

