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CANNES 2024

# MONGREL

A FILM BY  
CHIANG WEI LIANG

## SCREENINGS

### LERINS 3

May 15 / 11:30 (priority badges only)

### THÉÂTRE CROISSETTE

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### THÉÂTRE CROISSETTE

May 20 / 18:15

### LERINS 1

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QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2024

WANLOP RUNGKUMJAD LU YI-CHING HONG YU-HONG KUO SHU-WEI ATCHARA SUWAN

# MONGREL

A FILM BY

CHIANG WEI LIANG

TAIWAN, SINGAPORE, FRANCE - 2024  
128 MIN - 1:33 - 5,1  
TAIWANESE, MANDARIN, THAI

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A man with dark hair, wearing a blue and white striped jacket with red accents on the sleeves, is crouching in a dimly lit room. He is looking down at a dark-colored dog that is sitting on the floor. The background consists of metal bars, suggesting a cage or a secure facility. The lighting is low, creating a somber and intimate atmosphere.

## SYNOPSIS

Oom has no papers or formal training but is good at caring for the elderly and disabled. When his situation as a caregiver in the mountains becomes too much for him, he has to choose between survival or dignity.

### **How did cinema come to you, and then take you further away from home?**

WL: As a student at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, I was initially earning a bachelor's degree in journalism studies but I was quickly disappointed by the limited press freedom in Singapore. I crossed over to the other extreme and took up copywriting but it left me wanting. A practical filmmaking module taken on a lark, however, initiated my interest in the craft. My early efforts were largely brief and inconsequential, but for a then socially isolated person trying to figure out what he wanted to do in life, the experience of being part of a close-knit group was titillating - I was drawn to the camaraderie and captivated by the creative nature of the work. The coursework was complemented by Asian cinema studies, of which, I was deeply moved by the ingenuity and solidarity of the Taiwanese New Wave. Eager to learn more, I left for Taiwan at 20 - armed with meagre savings and a passable command of Mandarin. I didn't know anyone there but a series of happy accidents led to opportunities for me to work illegally on productions, and then to a group of friends that I hold dear to this day. I was delighted to find myself warmly welcomed into their collective and however juvenile our filmmaking endeavors were, I was energized and determined to make the move permanent. After all, this was what I came for.

### **Your films, since the shorts, are strongly and directly connected with the social issues. Especially migrant workers/immigration.**

WL: After I arrived in Taiwan, because of all these visits to the National Immigration Agency (NIA), I met countless Southeast Asians, most of whom were migrant workers around my age. We were all strangers set adrift in an alien environment, and the feelings of being away from home bound us. The few of us who kept bumping into each other exchanged contacts and we became friends. Through a mix of broken English and heavily accented Mandarin, these small interactions in the smoking corner grew into longer conversations and I quickly realized the Taiwan I experienced was vastly different from theirs.

From the absence of rights protection, government inaction and lack of public concern, migrant workers continue to endure exploitation, abuse, misunderstandings, and inconveniences - with each personal story recounted, I finally understood why I kept seeing some of them at the NIA and found myself struggling with anger at the magnitude of their invisibility.

Taiwan boasts the densest concentration of mountains of any island in the world. Scattered with small towns and remote plantations, the vastness of its Central Mountain Range stretches law enforcement thin and promises shelter. Widespread labor shortage in the region offers "better" employment opportunities and undocumented migrants workers would largely rely on a vast underground network of traffickers to make this journey, risking further exploitation and exposure to unwarranted acts of police brutality, yet...

### **What makes you so obsessed with the subject matter of immigration precisely?**

WL: Immigrants are compelled, out of respect for themselves and the group that allowed them to leave their country of origin, to play down the suffering of emigration. Separated from their families and homelands, they are burdened by the guilt of this absence, yet at the same time, they are absent in their host countries, occupying liminal spaces and excluded from participating in civil society. This metaphor of a contradictory "double absence" —as Abdelmalek Sayad describes in *La Double Absence* (The Suffering of the Immigrant)— resonated with me and it led me to question what were the means in which immigrants can seek to compensate for their absence or to make their presence felt. The former was beyond my reach but surely, I can do something about the latter. The precarious, invisible lives of migrant workers remain at the center of my practice. The details were different in each situation, but every single one of them pointed towards the same exploitative brokerage system and deficiency in existing laws. There was no end to these situations and as I toil on naively, I grew aware that my portrayal of their realities and difficulties would never amount to lasting, meaningful change - and any small progress made was tempered with the greater realization of...

**One of the pitfalls of this is that they often turn out only to be a social “message”. How do you balance the strong social aspect of your work with the artistic aspect of the film?**

WL: For me, questions raised are more important than statements made. When a filmmaker embarks on a project, some viewpoint is inevitably asserted. However, when a position is too overt, it diminishes the film's potential for engagement. I feel the balance lies in constructing a film as an inquiry that sparks curiosity, encourages reflection, and most importantly, invites dialogue. “Cinema must come from non-cinema.” To me, this oft-repeated saying by director Hou Hsiao-hsien, meant an unyielding commitment to create an artistic vision of personal truth through your characters, locations and situations portrayed. He would always follow it up with another nugget of wisdom - you are your cinema. Indeed, who we are as a person would inform the ways we approach filmmaking and it is utmost crucial for one to be honest. There were many lessons director Hou would impart, but these two principles continue to inform my approach.

**What's the birth of Mongrel ?**

WL: For decades, rural-to-urban migration remains the dominant flow of internal migration in Taiwan. As cities continue to flourish, rural areas are shrinking and losing healthcare options. Replacing them were small clinics and mobile medical teams, staffed with a rotating roster of nursing or physician trainees - many who struggle to fill the enormous medical needs and contribute unwittingly to the distrust of local healthcare providers.

A local patient population, equally isolated and socially invisible like the migrant caregivers that serve them. The tyranny of distance pervasive in their lives, manifesting in the spaces they occupy. The absence of presence. The presence of absence. Each mirroring the other, yet also presenting different ethnographic perspectives on spatial and social (im)mobility. It was irrefutable how my concerns on caregiving and ongoing exploration of marginalisation were aligning in these wild and lonely lands, and I knew instinctively that they would be the setting for Mongrel.

By now, I learnt firsthand how crushing the physical and emotional toll palliative care extracts, but how much more so when the caregiver- in-question is an immigrant? Who, in many ways, is closer to the patient than the family members who hired them, yet whose paradoxical status of being both foreign and domestic, evokes their fears and distrust? Who cares for the caregiver? And especially so, when he or she is a migrant worker? Nothing in life prepares you for caregiving until a situation rears its head. I was staring at the very nature of caregiving - how naked, helpless, and punishing it is.

**How do you shape the main character of the film, Oom, who is an immigrant caregiver ?**

WL: I knew I needed a protagonist who is at once personal to me and slowly build him up with my tendencies. He is reluctant to open up to others when overwhelmed by caregiving burdens or familial responsibilities; he empties every ounce of empathy he has in his job and that drains his emotional capacity; he struggles with guilt and bitterness when despite his best intentions, he still comes up short.

Yet at the same time, he also serves as a collective representative that provides a communal framing of the world this film is set in. His shoulders are broader. His burden heavier. Navigating the challenges of being an undocumented migrant worker. Harboring their hopes, fears and disillusion. His presence awash in loneliness and rootlessness. The culmination of all the lives I have had the privilege to cross paths with over a single decade.

**You often work with non-professional actors. For this first feature film, how did you compose your cast?**

WL: Due to all my years of working with non-actors, there was a certain rawness that I was accustomed to and wanted to retain. Upon exhausting all the possible means to work with a non-actor (in this case, an undocumented migrant worker) without running afoul of Taiwan's labor laws, I knew I had to pivot to casting an actor and Wanlop Rungkumjad was the first person that came to my mind. I was first introduced to Wanlop in 2011 through the film *Eternity* (2010, dir. Sivaroj Kongsakul) and the tenderness he brings to the characters he plays had left a lasting impression on me. I found it serendipitous too, that his nickname was Oom (which in Thai means "to support") and I wrote the script with him in mind - this was before finally meeting him in person several years down the road. We hit it off right away. Wanlop is an actor who wore his heart on his sleeve, and I needed to find others who could match him in this regard.

A little about Hui. From ease of communication to a smoother working process, I understood why people of disabilities were usually played by able-bodied actors but was adamant that if we can account and plan around their involvement, these challenges could most definitely be overcome. Be it from my years of volunteering or the sheer amount of interactions I had with people of disabilities, I was firm on the notion that the emotionality and physicality of this character could not (and should not) be emulated.

The onus was on us to find someone (whose physical and medical conditions) could manage (or overcome with assistance) the rigours of production, is conscious of and receptive to directions so as to deliver their performances. We scoured the entire island for possible candidates and it was hard to find people who were comfortable and willing to commit. For many of them, acting was uncharted territory and the scenes that Hui finds himself in are understandably raw and heavy, but Shu-wei understood what we were going for. He also shared about his experience applying for Hand Angel - a volunteer group in Taiwan that performs sexual services exclusively for people with disabilities - and could perceive that the question of sexual self-esteem was at hand in his scene with Oom.

**Lu Yi-ching, who plays Mei, is also really astonishing in the film.**

WL: At this stage of her career, Yi-Ching is no stranger to a character like Mei but even so, I could tell how much she was affected by the material and in particular on our visits to the various medical facilities. Even so, she was a steadying presence and under her lead, the initial communication barriers between herself, Wanlop and Shu-wei quickly fell away. Over the various outings I had them take together as part of their preparations; they would build a familiarity with one another that would translate into an affecting simplicity in the film. Yi-Ching had a softness in her response that moved me. Perhaps it was because she had battled a severe illness herself, and considering her age, farewells and separations were inevitable by this point. She reminded me again of the Chinese title I had for the film - an expression that largely refers to the impermanence of all things. Why cry over parts of life, when all of it calls for tears?

**Why choose Bai Yi Cang Gou as the Chinese title?**

WL: The Chinese title of the film *Bai yi cang gou* is an idiom derived from the poem *Of Lament* by Tang poet Du Fu. It speaks to the impermanence and continuity of life, as well as the myriad experiences it encompasses. On a separate note, nurses are often referred in Chinese as *bai yi* (white garments) *tian shi* (angels) or "angels in white". If we regard the Chinese title as separate adjective and noun, then the English title *Mongrel* comes into play, and it's a nod to the migrant caregivers in our film.

**Where did the shooting take place? How long was the shoot?**

WL: The film was shot over 35 days, from early February to late March in 2023. Filming locations span the entire length of Taiwan, including Yilan in the northeast, Miaoli and Taichung in the west, Nantou in the geographical center, and Kaohsiung in the south.

**In terms of cinematography, how did you design your shots? Why do you use 4:3 since your short films?**

WL: Two main reasons. The first is purely economical - my short films were made with little to no money and a narrower frame meant less of a set to dress. The second is because of the intimacy and focus it affords the characters and the circumstances they find themselves in. In *Mongrel*, warmth is scarce and hard to come by. Figuratively, it only emanates from our character(s) - if any. Literally, it is seen only specifically in their place of abode (e.g. the burn barrel in the dormitory, the fan heater in Mei's house). The lighting plan is thus crafted to shroud the film in darkness and evoke a sense of cold and dampness, of which when it works in tandem with the composition, allows the viewer to especially feel the "warmth" of Oom in a tangible but ineffable way.

**It's a film about death, in which the treatment of illness, the body, and death make me think of Maurice Pialat's *The Mouth Agape*: cold, direct, even merciless, like the beginning of *Mongrel*. It remains tough and frontal, but successfully avoids miserablisme, exhibitionism, absolutism and especially voyeurism; it is without pity, of course, but above all without false humanism. It simply looks at us: human things, all too human. It is profoundly compassionate.**

WL: There is a line from the fifth chapter of Lao-Tzu's *Daodejing* : Heaven and Earth are impartial; to them all of creation are as straw dogs(天地不仁以萬物為芻狗). In essence, it speaks of nature as treating all with parity and do not, on the basis of morality, give favor to some over others. In many ways, it affected how I felt the film should end - a narrative in which the protagonist emerges "victorious" or "redeemed" by the end as originally scripted no longer spoke to me. Instead, I sought to evoke a sense of transience, neither cruel nor benign but just is.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

A story like *Mongrel* can happen anywhere in the world. Over the past decade, my work has focused on the precarious, invisible lives of undocumented migrant workers.

Although *Mongrel* is a work of fiction, it is drawn from my own experiences and the stories of countless others I have met from the Southeast Asian community here in Taiwan. It brings together two things that are very personal to me: the physical and emotional toll that palliative care extracts from the caregiver, and how much more so when the caregiver-in-question is an immigrant. For rural communities with limited access to healthcare, illegal caregivers are the last resort. Mostly coming from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, these men and women are not trained medical professionals - they provide help with daily tasks and manage the basic physical needs of their patients. In many ways, these migrant caregivers can become closer to the patient than the family members who hire them, yet are foreigners in the domestic space.

How far is too far for someone to care for us? And who cares for the caregiver - especially when he or she is a migrant worker?







## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Singapore, Chiang Wei Liang graduated from the Nanyang Technological University with a degree in Communication Studies and completed his MFA (Film Directing) at the Taipei National University of the Arts.

Based in Taiwan for the past decade, his work focuses on migration and diaspora of Southeast Asians in modern Asia. His film, *Anchorage Prohibited* received the Audi Short Film Award at the 66th Berlinale. Recent short films *Luzon*, *Nyi Ma Lay* and the VR short film *Only The Mountain Remains* – in competition at the 76th Venice Film Festival – continue this commentary on the difficult lives of migrants. Chiang is an alumnus of the Locarno Filmmakers Academy, Talents Tokyo, FID Campus and the Golden Horse Film Academy, mentored by esteemed Taiwanese auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsien.

*Mongrel* is his first feature film.

## FILMOGRAPHY

### Feature Films

*Mongrel* (2024)

### Short Films

*Kaohsiung City, Yancheng District, Fubei Rd., No.31* (2021)  
*Only the Mountain Remains* (2018)  
*Nyi Ma Lay* (2017)  
*Luzon* (2017)  
*Anchorage Prohibited* (2015)  
*Soulik* (2015)

## CAST

**WANLOP RUNGKUMJAD** is an actor and production designer in the Thai independent film scene. After his acting debut in *Eternity* (dir. Sivaroj Kongsakul, Tiger Award, IFFR), Rungkumjad starred in *36* (dir. Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit, New Currents Award, Busan), *The Island Funeral* (dir. Pimpaka Towira, Asian Future Award, Tokyo), *Manta Ray* (dir. Phuttiphong Aroonpheng, Orizzonti Award for Best Film, Venice), and *Anatomy of Time* (dir. Jakrawal Nilthamrong, Grand Prize, Tokyo Filmex).

A respected actress in the Taiwan film industry, **LU YI-CHING** is a frequent collaborator with Tsai Ming-liang, starring in 10 of his films. She has been nominated for the Golden Horse Awards for Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress seven times.

Lead vocalist of the Taiwanese rap group Nine One One, **HONG YU-HONG** has recently ventured into acting. These include *Miss Shampoo* by Giddens Ko, which he received a Best New Actor nomination for at the Golden Horse Awards, Doze Niu's *Monga* and Kai Ko's *Bad Education*.

**KUO SHU-WEI** is a debut actor who is committed to honing his craft as a performer. For his role in *Mongrel*, Kuo sought inspiration from his peers and observation of his surroundings. Born with dyskinetic cerebral palsy, Kuo is motivated to change public perception on actors with disabilities.

**ATCHARA SUWAN** is an actress, part-time writer, and barista. Previous films include *By The Time It Gets Dark* by Anocha Suwichakornpong, and *Krabi, 2562* by Ben Rivers & Anocha Suwichakornpong that screened at both Locarno and TIFF.



## CAST

Oom	WANLOP RUNGKUMJAD
Mei	LU YI-CHING
Hsing	HONG YU-HONG
Hui	KUO SHU-WEI
Mhai	ATCHARA SUWAN

## CREW

Written by	CHIANG WEI LIANG
Directed by	CHIANG WEI LIANG
Director of Photography	YIN YOU QIAO
Production Designer	MICHAËL CAPRON
Editor	YE TZU-WEI
Colorist	DOUNIA SICHIOV
Sound Designers	YOV MOOR
	R.T KAO
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Executive Producers	HOU HSIAO-HSIEN
	LIAO CHING-SUNG
	JENNIFER JAO
Producers	LAI WEIJIE
	LYNN CHEN
	CHU YUN-TING
Co-Producers	MARIE DUBAS
	ELIZABETH WIJAYA



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