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## of Passion



Mongolia is not a country known for its cinema. Vast landscapes, subzero temperatures and a nomadic lifestyle have long been its calling cards, and more recently, the words *copper* and *gold* have become synonymous with the landlocked nation. Mining, that behemoth of a sector, is currently throwing curveballs at a country still reeling from its transition to democracy and a free market economy in 1990. In amongst the chaos, struggling to find a voice, there remains a semblance of a national cinema hoping to forge a path towards a sustainable future.

Byamba Sakhya is one filmmaker at the coalface of this struggle. He's a writer, director and cinematographer who has worked in the local industry for over 25 years on both local and international productions including *State of Dogs*, *Khadak* and *Babies*. His latest documentary film *Passion* offers a unique insight into the past and present of Mongolian cinema.

With himself as the narrator, Sakhya follows filmmaker Binder Jigjid, the son of acclaimed Mongolian director Jigjid Dejid, as he doggedly travels the country to distribute and screen his own films. The unmistakable landscape of Mongolia serves as Sakhya's set while he explores the universal battle between art and commerce and the issues faced by filmmakers the world over. Underpinning the film is the notion of human choice, as Sakhya contrasts the challenges faced by filmmakers in years gone by with those of today.

*Passion* was last year awarded the Asia Vision Award Grand Prize at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival, officially selected in the Wide Angle section of the Pusan International Film Festival and screened at the Dubai International Film Festival. In awarding the Asia Vision Grand Prize, the jury described *Passion* as “a beautiful film infused with nostalgia, sadness and a strange, hopeful optimism.” “Hopeful optimism” would seem to be the fuel that fires Sakhya and others hoping to build a strong national cinema in Mongolia today.

While an abundance of locally produced content graces the screens of theatres in the country’s two multiplexes, the majority of local films lack high artistic value and instead exist to generate profit and keep the public happy – a concept reflected somewhat in the politics of the country.

“We are still going through a huge transition – political, social, economic and of course a values transition,” says Sakhya. “I think all of us, especially the younger generation, are a bit confused by that. Many people are still struggling to survive in this chaotic period. Everyday needs dominate our lives. Our politicians make extremely populist promises and our policy makers make short-term economical decisions. All these actions are taken just to survive, to be the winner on the day. Filmmakers are just a part of this society.”

Filmmaking is not new to Mongolia – the national film studio ‘Mongol Kino’ was established in 1935 – but the industry has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. Before 1990, films were heavy on ideology and light on experimentation. Soviet assistance meant that filmmakers were well trained, equipment was readily available, and a solid distribution network existed, but this came at the expense of creative freedom. With a stringent system in place that saw bureaucrats oversee every stage of the filmmaking process, filmmakers faced an uphill battle to release their films.

“Those directors were not just implementers of the party ideology though,” points out N. Uranchimeg, journalist and film director with Mongolian broadcaster MNTV. “They were extremely talented people who were the face of the film industry. They struggled for 75 years to win with their original ideas despite having to pass through all those stages of control. Now we see that this fight still continues.”

The fight now though has different rules. Today Mongolia’s filmmakers have the artistic freedom their predecessors so desired, but not the means or support to flex their creative muscle. Virtually no state subsidy exists for Mongolian cinema, which means filmmakers are forced to seek independent funding that often comes from private businesses keen for a quick turnaround on their investment. No formal distribution network exists and, lacking exposure to anything else, audiences are better acquainted with Hollywood blockbusters than solid local produce, creating a skewed demand.

“In socialist times, we had a very good distribution service,” explains B. Tumen-Ulzii, a film critic, director and producer with Mongolian broadcaster NTV. “A new film was able to be shown in 18 aimags (regions) at the same time... but after the social change, the system collapsed. Distribution is now the responsibility of the film’s creators, but the market is small so the filmmaker him or herself must travel around the country to show their own film.”

In *Passion*, Sakhya documents his protagonist doing just that, and together he and Binder lament, “communist ideology has been replaced by money ideology”.

“Binder’s father Jigjid never studied film but he succeeded in becoming one of the most important and celebrated filmmakers of Mongolia who created classic cinema,” says Sakhya. “Jigjid had almost everything except artistic freedom but I don’t think his enormous talent was

fully realised entirely under the political censorship of the time.

“Artistic freedom is now available for Binder, but he faces new challenges. To survive in a market-driven society Binder has to produce extremely low budget commercial films even though he dreams of magnificent creations.”

Sakhya believes the ‘Golden Age’ for Mongolian cinema was from the late 50s until the 70s – the period in which Jigjid was making films. By this time, the nation’s first generation of directors had reached a certain level of skill and experience and a national cinema had been established.

“We saw a kind of explosion of Mongolian culture and art during that period, especially in theatre, literature and music, and the second generation of filmmakers became a part of that. At that time, films had a naïve, idealistic communist romanticism to them, and even today, that naivety and romanticism still comes across as quite charming and sincere.

“We waited for the third generation of filmmakers to arrive but it never did. In my opinion, by the 80s we already had heavily ideological art ruled by bureaucrats. They didn’t care about real talent so they supported the wrong people. Fortunately there was one filmmaker, Baljinnyam Begz, who made some very important films in that period. Technically though, due to his age and experience, he belongs to the second generation of filmmakers.

“So it wasn’t just the social and economic transitions that caused Mongolian cinema to collapse so quickly - it was already losing its artistic quality by the 90s. After Baljinnyam, there was not one strong, talented film director who could lead and care for our national cinema.”

Now, some 20 years on, Mongolian cinema is at a critical juncture. New technology is becoming more accessible and young audiences are slowly starting to seek out less mainstream films. In a particularly important move, the Arts Council of Mongolia held the country’s first international film forum and festival in Ulaanbaatar in October last year. Primarily funded by the Asia-Europe Foundation and Open Society Institute, the event saw renowned filmmakers and industry professionals from Asia, Europe and Central Asia come together to share ideas, insight and advice with their Mongolian counterparts during screenings, workshops and a forum. They also worked with fledgling filmmakers to foster development.

“The generation of classically educated filmmakers has now ended so we are witnessing a growth of new experimental filmmakers,” says N. Uranchimeg.

Sakhya agrees that new, young filmmakers are now taking the first steps towards rebuilding a national cinema, but is cautious about predicting which direction it will take.

“It’s hard to say. The future of cinema is in the exactly same situation as the future of this country. There is definitely the opportunity to create history in the right way but there are so many factors that may take us the wrong way as well.

“We should not forget that Mongolia is part of a globalised world, so the future of Mongolian cinema will also depend on what happens in world cinema over the next few years. We might see an explosion of unique cinema from Mongolia, as we are witnessing today in Romanian cinema. But for that we really need a good example, a successful case of international recognition for a real Mongolian film. If that happens soon, then we might just have a real new wave of Mongolian cinema within just a few years.”

With his debut fiction feature in the works (a French co-production that has already received funding support for script and project development) and passion and freedom acting as his driving forces, it's very possible that it might even be Byamba Sakhya leading the new charge.

By Alicia Kish

Alicia Kish is a Sydney-based writer who recently spent a year living in Mongolia where she worked on the inaugural [East Meets West Film Forum + Festival](#) and at the [Arts Council of Mongolia](#). She documented her year away here: [www.oneeyedyaks.com](http://www.oneeyedyaks.com)

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