

04

Sasha Han

Interview with

*Judith
Tong*

of **FFF.FOREVER**



A number of decentralised networks and initiatives have emerged in the moving image community since the pandemic. If the Film Industry operates under the guise of hefty institutions which segregates its stakeholders – moving image curators, filmmakers and audience – in hierarchical, vertical structures of relations, these informal gatherings have paved the way for reciprocal encounters between its stakeholders.

Gatherings initiated by various communities such as FFF forever, Home Movie Day (HMD) and this where film club allow for anyone at all levels of interest to commune and engage with each other. These communities rely on social media notices, word-of-mouth spread of their existence and in the case of HMD, pre-existing networks of adjacent interests in analogue photography techniques to draw and expand their community. The result: a more horizontal, self-organisational approach to film appreciation and an ever-shape-shifting exchange of camaraderie and ideas.

Since her time in film school, Judith Tong, founder of fff forever, has emerged as one of the most promising producers of her generation. Having worked with esteemed local filmmakers like K. Rajagopal and then upcoming Nicole Woodford Midori, Han Feng Yu, Shoki Lin and Mark Chua and Li Shuen on starry-Hollywood productions the likes of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *Westworld Season 3*, Judith seemed at the precipice of a seismic career in feature films. The time she was already spending in the realm of film however, put things into perspective and led her to reflect on what it means to create a sustainable film community.

In the conversation that follows, she speaks about FFF.forever, its roots in the film clubs she attended as a student and how its new iteration also functions as a support group for her colleagues and peers' isolation. FFF.forever has since been hosted by a cast of film workers including Jonathan Choo, Vincent Quek and Daryl Cheong – even without Judith's direct involvement since she departed for a year-long work holiday abroad. Their events range from "in-focus" programmes with Mark Chua and Lam Li Shuen and experimental shorts by a slew of experimental filmmakers to game night outings at bowling alleys or video games. Beyond the fact that filmmakers of the films programmed tend to be present at their screenings to allow for casual encounters between themselves and their audience, FFF.forever's existence offers a compelling picture and possibility for what a real community of film folks could be when space for encounters unbounded by invisible hierarchies is allowed to take root.

Sasha Han (SH): I wanted to start with your producing background. The projects you take on centre vital health and social issues: depression in *Mama* (2020), dementia in *Attha's Samaiyal* (2020) and migrant workers in *Here is Not There* (2019) and *Send Off* (2020). Was there a concern you had that you wanted to address with FFF.forever?

Judith Tong (JT): With the films I've produced, it always begins with what stories directors want to tell and how they resonate with me. I tend to feel like there's a need for them to exist and it's something that I can stand behind.

Similarly with FFF, it felt important for a space like that to exist. In early 2023, I was having conversations with filmmakers who were struggling in various ways. Some seemed to be going through bouts of creative depression while a number of people who had gone to film school abroad came back and felt displaced, closed off from the wider community of filmmakers. There was this overwhelming sense of isolation, as if we live in silos. I think it has to do with how our education system sets us up to be competitive, but filmmaking is already so hard. We need to be able to talk about how hard it is to make films. Not gossip, but share our issues so others will feel compelled to share their own struggles. With that, we might be able to find solutions.

SH: I'm wondering, do people want to reach out to each other?

JT: When I was actively producing films, I worked on a lot of projects at the same time. I was constantly asked things like how is so-and-so's project going, what are they up to, how do they earn money? I always wondered why I'm their source of information. People are genuinely curious about each other, but there's a fear of reaching out and getting rejected.

I think there simply is a need for these conversations to exist. It's unrealistic to think that kind of insecurity will go away completely. Something like what directors do to survive is a very important thing for everyone — especially young directors who are coming into the industry. It's helpful to know what other directors do to earn a living. They shouldn't come in thinking they can just survive on directing; a lot of directors I know teach or do odd jobs.

I'm really talking about empathy. In this niche industry, the few of us who decided that this is our passion should band together to really push it. If we continue to be individualistic, I don't see how our industry can be what we want it to be.

SH: You mentioned the industry and I want to ask what you think about the audience. Because as much as FFF.forever acts as a support group of film workers, it's also a film club. It feels like you're extending an invitation to an audience who would like to actively participate in cultivating a film culture because the group is so publicly accessible across social media platforms. What is the place of the audience in the film industry and how do you conceive of the audience?

JT: It's interesting that you brought up the audience because what got me into film was wanting to share the power of cinema. I was studying PR and photojournalism in Poly but gravitated towards film because I was part of a film club called SG New Wave. The power of cinema for me is the power to move people and change perspectives. It might not be a huge change, but a subtle push in another direction.

I will say that my initial focus was to create this space for people in the industry because otherwise, the scope would be too wide. But I also wanted to keep it open-ended and I think it now exists to serve different communities. The whole point of setting this up was so that it doesn't feel like an elite little club and anyone can access it. I wanted that unique interaction where you can be somebody who doesn't do film at all — because you don't have to be a creative person to enjoy film — to interact with those who do. I didn't want it to be centred around me either so you can take me out of the equation and it will still work. Whoever wanted to chip in can be part of it. If you are looking for a certain thing, hopefully it's here and you find it in this space. If not, I would love to hear what you're looking for and if it makes sense to incorporate that, I would love for it to grow in that direction.

It's nice because I noticed that there were people from different organisations like SGIFF, Objectifs, Projector and AFA in FFF. In a space where there aren't boundaries, there isn't a need to draw a line between organisations. Here, they can exist together and you can promote your own programmes to an audience that is interested to know more. During my research for my year abroad, I came across many Telegram groups. They're just there so people who join later can still access these resources like an online library. With something like the resources page on FFF.forever's Telegram, anyone remotely interested in applying for grants or fellowship programmes could look at these collated resources. The hope is that other producers in the industry will continue updating that page because they obviously know it a lot better than I do. There's always a kind of competition around applying for these things. Yes, it's limited, and there's a lot of people applying, but I think for new producers and directors who are trying for something it goes a long way when others talk about their experience applying for it. I can't expect people to think this way so if I want things to move in that direction. I need to start with myself.

Screening of
 Mark Chua and Lam
 Li Shuen's *Revolution
 Launderette* (2019)



SH: Has the demographic of people who have been coming surprising?

JT: There was one I thought was very interesting. He's a film critic that happened to be at AFA's screening of *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992). He didn't know about FFF but ended up coming along to the bar with us because a friend invited him. I didn't expect him to come back, but he's been attending almost all the events and has brought another critic friend as well. It's cool that people still try to push against the current and try to put stuff out there — even if it's just a passion for now. It's with many voices like that that the industry will really grow in a multi-faceted way.

Vincent Quek, founder of Anticipate Pictures, has been attending regularly. Having people like that beyond production is very important because sometimes, people who are working in the industry don't necessarily understand how much it matters that people go to the cinemas and watch a film and just stay at home to stream things. But distributors need the box office support. It's a reception thing as well: you can create, but if there's no one there to receive that product, then what's there?

SH: I understand that FFF has been through several iterations through the years. There was Intervals, then Back to One before it became FFF. Before that, you mentioned being part of SGNewWave. Can you walk us through them and what have you got from each of these phases that you've put into FFF?

JT: For me, this idea of a film club really started with SGNewWave in Ngee Ann Polytechnic. It's where my love for film was kindled.

Intervals came out of a supper with a friend in Poly. He had this rooftop space and asked if I wanted to organise some screenings. It was quite ground-up: there was a \$5 entry to cover the cost of food — not for the films because we screened things without permission.

The next time I did something like that was Back to One in Nanyang Technological University. I thought of it as going back to the basics, the way you call, “Back to one,” to reset on a shoot. It was born out of how we hadn't been taught production design. It happened that a lot of my classmates were building sets for their final year projects and these sets looked very unsafe. I thought it was mad. I'd already started freelancing so I had the contacts of some people and knew of others I wasn't personally acquainted with. I wrote sincere emails to see if they replied and was really surprised when James Page replied. He works closely with Akanga Film Asia¹ and worked on *Apprentice* (2016) and *A Yellow Bird* (2016). During the masterclass we organised, he showed us how he created the jail and hanging set for *Apprentice* and how he made different places look like one cohesive space. I also invited seniors who'd just graduated and were doing interesting, DIY set designs because I wanted to show that what all these industry people do, students can achieve as well. We eventually brought it to Lasalle because I thought it would be a very cool way to meet people from other schools. I thought of it as we're all from different schools of fishes going up to this pool of the industry, so it'd be good if we knew each other earlier.

Then right before COVID, I was hanging out with Ivan Tan. It was the first time I was in his space but I found myself saying, “Ivan, your space is amazing. It's so cosy. Can we use your space for stuff?” I wasn't so close to him then and told him to not worry and leave the organising of the club to me; he just needed to provide the space. For 8 months, we would decide on a film together based on how free we were and what we always wanted to watch but haven't seen. At some point we thought that we should open this up to non-film people by encouraging those who were already coming to bring a non-film industry friend. We were interested in the kind of conversations that might happen after the screening. This was FFF.

¹ Production company

SH: Why bring FFFforever back at this very moment?

JT: There are so many good producers pursuing features and there's a very clear path in which I could be producing features as well but the thought of it isn't very fulfilling. I can make features and just keep on making features and then... what?

How the industry as a whole can grow is more important to me now. Besides, my goal with producing films was always about getting behind someone and creating a conducive environment for them to make what they want. With FFF, I wanted to centre relationships. Good projects come and go but we make films because we have relationships with people, so it's about building and maintaining these connections.

SH: What's your ideal atmosphere at FFF?

JT: I think it's quite chill. I mean, I try to make it comfortable as much as possible.

SH: What does that entail?

JT: That people can feel like they can hold space for other people if they can, or if they don't feel like socialising, they can still be around just to watch the film. They don't have to feel the need to share, they can just listen. I hope people realise they can just come even if they're not in a good space. If you could use some company and if you don't mind hanging out, just come to hang out.

And do things outside of film as well. We've already organised bowling and board game sessions. It takes off that edge that maybe some of us have and carry with us. Someone mentioned to me that sometimes when you plan these things, people will come with this persona that they need to be a filmmaker. Hopefully, at least in FFF, they'll realise they don't have to prove themselves to anyone.



SH: By the way, what does FFF stand for?

JT: Friends, film and food. It's all the things that I love. If you have to put them in order, it's food, film and friends. Actually, my first love is food, not film. Then there's food and film to bond them. How I sometimes think of it is you might not start off as friends but because you eat and watch films together, you become friends. That's the idea. I actually wanted to make a zine about food and film that had FFF as a name. I have a mood board with films that feature a lot of food or what characters in a particular world would eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I just borrowed the name.

SH: You said at the beginning that you once found a purpose and place in the industry by helping your directors tell stories they want to tell. Now, with your year abroad in Australia coming up, it feels like you've stepped away from that and you can really just provide a service of helping a broader range of people.

JT: Yeah, that's what it sounds like to me actually. I think it's also because my love language is acts of service. Of course it's tiring, but I think it doesn't take a toll on me as much as others. I always thought if I do find people who want to carry on with this, it's probably going to be a group of people. This is community, volunteer work.

I feel it's important I share why I feel like I want to take a step away from the industry. It's very consuming. As a producer, you are the first person people go to. I love solving problems but I think it also takes a toll on you when your state of mind is constantly on high alert, ready to fight fires. It's not a life that I envisioned for myself for the long haul. When I first started in the industry, I didn't mind letting film dictate my life for a while, especially when I got to work on cool projects like *Westworld* and felt this sense of fulfilment and rush. With a job like that though, the nature of the work is that you are always on standby while your personal life and health are secondary. I haven't found an answer on how to make it sustainable.

SH: I think it also sounds like you kind of want to go back to just being an audience.

JT: Maybe it's that. Maybe it's also me realising that there's other roles to play. I don't just have to be in this role that I found myself in. I look at people who have been doing this for a long time and I don't see myself in them. They do a lot of amazing things on the surface but I see all the sacrifices that they make. I have an ambition for myself. I see a life that is singular and is not so stressful. Where I can still enjoy films but not feel so... tired. My way of recharging was watching films. Everything was film, film, film. I was so unhappy because it was everywhere. I just realised that it's not for me at all. It took a while for me to finally have the courage to do this because it's all I know and it's tied to my identity. I always introduced myself as a producer. Lately, I've been shedding that labour of being a producer. I'm more than that. I have so many interests. So I think I made that crossroads.

SH: I don't mean to put another label on you but would you call yourself a community organiser?

JT: I do think I'm naturally for the community. I like bringing people together. Sometimes when I meet a person, I'm like, "Oh, actually you should meet this other person. I think you all will really hit it off. And I think it would be really cool to just connect you all."

SH: While you still facilitate the experience of an audience, as an audience member yourself, what do you like seeing? What is your dream for the audience?

JT: Wow, that's a big one. For me, a hallmark of a good film is at the end of the film and I feel like something in me shifts. I'm frozen in my seat when the credits are rolling. I guess what I hope to see more in Singapore would be a more collaborative community across the films we make and the process of making them. I would love to see more films that tackle the ugliness of our society. We are very success driven and everything's so expensive here so we don't dare to tell stories that are not proven to resonate. That even without a lot of resources, we remain unafraid to tell stories.

Regarding my dream for an audience, I feel Singaporeans constantly think that we don't have interesting stories. There's a few layers to this because generally, we're not very supportive of the arts. We don't live and breathe it in our everyday life. Going out to watch a play or a movie is a once in a blue moon kind of thing for the everyday Singaporean. I think it's going to take generations to change. I'm hopeful that one day we'll have aunties and grandmothers going to film festivals, the way I saw they were doing in Taiwan at the Golden Horse Film Festival. It's prestigious, but it also acts like a family event.

I also think that a way forward is to lower the bar of access, which means we should make better commercial films, actually. Sometimes I think we don't know who the audience is. We say we're making films for a local audience, but do we really understand this audience? When you have better commercial films, that's when people who are exposed to that will take a chance on art house cinema. I think a lot of people are making art house films to travel the festival circuit, but that's not going to get people into the cinemas. What we need isn't awards now, it's an audience.

SH: Do you think FFF could help with that?

JT: I hope it does. But I think it plays a very small role. Maybe, if someone who is not a filmmaker comes and they change their perspective on films because of the films we screen and the conversations that follow. For now, I hope it helps to get people out of their rough spots so they can keep making films, as well as to cultivate resource sharing. The audience is quite beyond us.