

Taking liberties

Filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang has been frustrated by censorship in his native Malaysia, writes **Yenni Kwok**



Tsai Ming-liang. Photo: Fortissimo Films

No matter how high a crane flies," a Malay proverb goes, "it will eventually return home." After spending nearly two decades making award-winning films in Taiwan, director Tsai Ming-liang has done just that. For *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* he has returned to Malaysia with a film that examines the lonely plight of migrant workers in a multicultural society.

The film was commissioned by Vienna's New Crowned Hope festival to celebrate Mozart's 250th birth last year, as part of a series that included films by Thailand's Apitchatpong Weerasekathul (*Syndromes and a Century*) and Indonesia's Garin Nugroho (*Opera Jawa*). Yet Tsai says he already had an idea to make a film about migrant workers when he took a break from working in Taiwan to spend a year back in Malaysia in 1999.

"I saw a lot of foreigners who worked as labourers," Tsai says. He was drawn to their plight, especially after the Asian economic crisis of 1997,

when many were left to fend for themselves.

Tsai, who regards himself as something of a wanderer, identified with the immigrants' predicaments. He also drew a comparison between their lives and that of the Austrian composer. "I saw a similarity," the 49-year-old filmmaker says. "Since he was six years old, Mozart wandered around Europe. It's the same with the labourers, who have spent their lives wandering in foreign countries."

I Don't Want to Sleep Alone revolves around a homeless Chinese immigrant, Hsiao-kang (played by Tsai's muse, Lee Kang-sheng), who is nursed by a Bangladeshi worker (Norman Atun) after being beaten by street thugs in Kuala Lumpur. Hsiao-kang later falls in love with a waitress named Chyi (Chen Shiang-chyi), who works under the watchful eye of her boss (Pearlly Chua) while nursing her paralysed son (also played by Lee).

Nominated for the Golden Lion award at last year's Venice Film Festival, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* has been hailed as the most accessible of Tsai's films - they're often considered slow, dark affairs - but it has also stirred controversy. Last year, he withdrew the film from Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards after jury members trashed it as "self-indulgent".

Having won 35 awards at film festivals, Tsai is the best known Malaysian-born filmmaker. Yet his homecoming project hasn't been warmly welcomed by the Malaysian government. The censorship board initially banned *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, citing its unfavourable depiction of the country, which shows locals beating up foreigners, poverty and air pollution. Only after he agreed to cuts was the film passed by censors.

"After being away for more than 20 years, the intensity of censorship still exists," he says. "The film talks about freedom, and it turns out it comes face to face with censorship. Censorship in Malaysia is why I didn't make a film there before."

In the film Kuala Lumpur is far from the modern, sleek metropolis that the government seeks to portray. The movie was partly shot in an unfinished building, one of the ghostly remains of the construction boom of the 1990s, with a large, dark pool of water on one of its floors. When Tsai saw the pool – water is a recurring element in his film - he knew he had to shoot there.

"Water can represent endless possibilities," he says. "It's up to individuals to interpret, but for me the dark pool represents hidden memories." *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* bears many of the director's trademark touches, such as long, fixed shots, a slow pace and minimal dialogue. Tsai's films have so little conversation that the characters seem to have difficulty conveying their emotions.

"I feel a lot of people have difficulties in communicating their emotions," he says. "I like depicting people in a lonely state. I feel that humans can be real when they're alone."

Tsai's background is far removed from the cold, urban life he depicts in his films. Born and raised in Kuching, the as-yet undeveloped capital of Sarawak, he has fond memories of an untroubled, care-free childhood. His grandparents introduced him to films, taking him to screenings of Hong Kong, Bollywood and Hollywood movies.

In 1977, at the age of 20, Tsai went to Taipei to study film and drama at the Chinese Cultural University, where he was exposed to European cinema masters, especially his idol, Francois Truffaut.

Lee Kang-sheng has starred in all the director's feature films since 1991. If loneliness is a recurring topic of Tsai's works, Lee's face is the personification of it. "I like to use the same face," Tsai says. "It's the one aspect of cinema I'm very interested in – observing a person's face."

Tsai's slow-paced films have a strong meditative pull. They invite viewers to surrender, sit and forget themselves, immersing in the lingering shots. Perhaps this has something to do with his small-town upbringing, where the pace of life was unhurried. Perhaps it's the influence of Buddhism, in which he has taken a keen interest lately.

"Buddhism is a religion that advocates the pursuit of internal freedom," he says. "In the movie, you'll notice that most characters lack material possessions, but they have an internal peace."

The dream-like sequence of Hsiao-kang with a moth can be seen as a reference to Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi's dream of a butterfly, he says, which asks what is real and what is illusionary. Yet, like his films, Tsai is

reluctant to give a clear answer. "You can also see the moth as a symbol of a wish to pursue love and freedom in life."

The interview was published in the South China Morning Post daily (www.scmp.com), 19 April 2007.