

QUEER AS PUNK

Director Yihwen Chen

Malaysia, Indonesia | 2025
88 min. | English, Malay with English subtitles

Cinematography Yihwen Chen. **Editing** Angen Sodo, Yihwen Chen. **Sound Design** Digital Orange. **Producer** Yihwen Chen. **Co-Producer** Mandy Marahimin. **Production company** Locke Films (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).

Synopsis

LGBT punk band 'Shh...Diam!' boldly defies its name—Malay for 'shut up!'—by shouting their truth to the world. Director Yihwen Chen chronicles the journey of this chosen family as they grow, spreading courage with wit, humor, and irresistible charm. **QUEER AS PUNK** invites audiences into the lives of band members Faris, Yon, and Yoyo, capturing candid conversations during Malaysia's shifting political landscape. The film delves into themes of self-expression, bodily transformation, love, parental expectations, anxiety, and political participation, all set against the backdrop of a country that denies queer rights. Democracy, stifled by state-endorsed monopolies on religion, desire, and identity, creates a suffocating environment. Amidst the challenges of 'pink migration', where many seek spaces to simply exist, collective care and camaraderie become essential lifelines. The Covid-19 pandemic adds another layer of hardship, yet the band perseveres, using their music and gigs to vent, flirt, and share laughs. With their bold sound and infectious energy, 'Shh...Diam!' will have you singing along in no time! (Lisabona Rahman)

Yihwen Chen is a Malaysian documentary filmmaker and journalist. Her debut feature documentary *Eye on the Ball*, about Malaysia's blind football team, premiered in London in 2019. In 2022, her #MeToo short documentary, *THE BOYS CLUB*, won the NETPAC Award during its world premiere at the Busan International Short Film Festival. Wen's second feature documentary **QUEER AS PUNK**, spotlighting marginalized communities in Malaysia, was supported by the Hot Docs CrossCurrents Fund and IDA Pare Lorentz Fund. She is also an alumna of IDFAcademy and American Film Showcase.

Films: 2019: *Eye on the Ball*. 2021: *The Boy's Club* (short film). 2025: *Queer as Punk*.

Director's Statement

The Relentless Pursuit of Authenticity

Challenging prejudices, celebrating diversity

QUEER AS PUNK is a deeply personal and unapologetic exploration of resilience, identity, and the fight for freedom of expression in a world that often seeks to silence the unconventional. In Malaysia, where conservative traditions and religious extremism dominate public discourse, this story unravels the courage it takes to be true to oneself.

Through the lens of Shh...Diam!, a queer punk band led by Faris, a transman, the film dives into the raw reality of those who dare to defy societal norms. It is a portrait of individuals fighting for their right to exist in a space that grows increasingly narrow. Their music is not just an art form but a medium – a bold, raucous declaration of identity and resistance in a climate that stifles freedom.

For me, this film is not only about documenting a moment in time but it is a mirror reflecting society's fears and prejudices and a window into the perseverance of those who rise above it. At its heart, **QUEER AS PUNK** is a celebration of the human spirit, solidarity, and the power of the chosen family. It showcases the relentless pursuit of authenticity, even when the cost is personal sacrifice.

This film also invites audiences to challenge their own biases, beliefs, and stereotypes. It asks us to reconsider the ways we view those who are different from ourselves and to see them as equals – as normal people navigating life with the same hopes, fears, and dreams as anyone else. By opening a window into their world, the film seeks to bridge the gaps between us, fostering empathy and a deeper understanding of our shared humanity.

My hope is that **QUEER AS PUNK** will inspire conversations about the importance of diversity, acceptance, and the universal human desire and right to live freely and authentically.

Yihwen Chen

Interview

"The songs work because of what we were facing"

Yih Wen Chen speaks to Lisabona Rahman and Barbara Wurm about filmmaking, activism and the power of friendship

Barbara Wurm: Welcome, Yih Wen Chen. We are extremely happy, proud and looking forward to having your film QUEER AS PUNK in our Forum 25 program, a film about the Malaysian punk band "Shh ... Diam".

Lisabona Rahman: Yes, a very warm welcome to Wen and the film. I was very excited during the selection process and I'm so

happy that you accepted our invitation. Maybe I could start with a very basic question. What does filmmaking mean to you?

Yih Wen Chen: Thank you to Berlinale and the Forum for selecting this Malaysian documentary. It's very meaningful, not just for me, but for everyone else who is working in the documentary scene here. I see filmmaking as a way to explore and understand the world, to document the human experience, and to amplify stories that often go unheard. More than just storytelling, it's about creating a mirror that reflects society's complexity and a window that fosters empathy and connection. For me, it isn't just a job or even a passion. It's a conscious decision to make it a journey of growth.

LR: What does it mean to you when your film is featured on a platform like the Berlinale?

YWC: Well, the creative documentary filmmaking landscape in Malaysia is almost non-existent. We do not have support, training, or funding opportunities for feature-length documentaries. If we want funding from our national film body, we are very limited in the topics that we can pursue - mostly TV length, nationalistic or cultural subjects. Hence, there is a lack of documentary filmmakers working in this area compared to fiction filmmakers. A lot of fiction filmmakers have gone on to show in Berlin and the big festivals, but not the documentary filmmakers. To be able to make a film and to be selected to a platform like Berlin, I would say that it's a win for all of us.

BW: When was the day that you decided to make the film? Do you remember?

YWC: Well, it was actually in 2017. I was in Phnom Penh at that time, for a month-long producing workshop for my first feature. That's also where I met my co-producer, Mandy Marahimin, who was my roommate. When I was there, I saw this Khmer rock band called Cambodian Space Project and I was inspired to make a music documentary. I was working full-time at the largest English newspaper in Malaysia and I had just published a short documentary about a young Chinese trans man. I knew about the band and they were the only publicly out queer band at that time. When I got back to Malaysia, my colleague connected me to my main protagonist, Faris, who was also working as a journalist. He told me that he watched my short documentary many times because there were no stories about trans men in our local media. We also discovered that we actually went to the same high school briefly. I thought I would film for a year and that's the story. But it ended up taking seven years to make the film, during which the country went through turbulent political times and a global pandemic.

LR: The band is called "Shh...Diam", what does it mean?

YWC: "Shh...Diam" means 'shut up' in Malay. I think they just came up with the name randomly. I can't remember the origin story, but I think it captures their rebellious spirit. They are not afraid of expressing themselves and being authentic. I think in societies where the queer communities are not widely accepted or where they are being discriminated against, people want them to just shut up. Of course, this band wants anything but to shut up and they want to make some noise with their music.

LR: They surely made some noise! Is their music your type of music?

YWC: I like post-rock and they have a post-rock song called "Intimaster". I would say that their music has evolved over the years. They are not your typical punk band, as you can hear when you watch the film. The songwriting process is very witty and that's a reflection of themselves. They would write song lyrics from text messages from friends. The song "Lonely Lesbian" is based on a local newspaper article, supposedly on how to identify lesbians.

BW: We were so inspired by the great attitude towards life of the band members. It is simply overwhelming how they address the happiness and the joy in life under the specific conditions of their surroundings. Is this why you wanted to work with them?

YWC: I remember when I met them, they were very welcoming, very accepting. They asked me a lot of questions about what I wanted to do. They told me that they had been approached by foreign filmmakers who wanted to film them, but they wanted a local person who understands the local context and has the cultural sensitivities to make the film.

LR: How do you position yourself, somewhere between a filmmaker and an old friend?

YWC: I position myself as both an observer and also an ally. I already knew some activists because of my journalist work, but not the wider community or the band until I started making the film. As an observer, I tried to document their lives authentically, letting their voices, actions, and music lead the story. As an ally, I approach the process with empathy and respect. For me, building trust is essential. I maintain an open and honest communication about the project and the progress at all times, making sure that they know that I'm here to amplify their voices and not to speak for them.

LR: I'm interested in knowing how you edit the film because the band and the people around them are good actors. They know exactly what to say, what to do, how to dress. They look fantastic on screen. But sometimes in documentary, it's a problem when your protagonists are too aware of being filmed. So how do you describe the push and pull factor of the performance that you got? It's brilliant and I want to know what's your tip.

BW: And just to add to that: you don't construct those scenes; it is more a process of participation and observation. You go along with the band, you travel with them, you go places with them. And as viewers we follow you, and we understand how much these places mean to them. They also create their living spaces quite actively, be it the life in a car or the tent camp, and of course, the bars and clubs where they have jam sessions. Was that part of your conceptual idea, to highlight these spaces, or would you say it came automatically because that's just how it is?

YWC: I think that when we are not exposed to somebody different from us, we tend to have our own biases and stereotypes about how they are. And in Malaysia, the stereotype or the misconception about queer people is, I would say, terrible. The song that they wrote, "Lonely Lesbian", that's how the media portrays queer people. So, with this film, I wanted to portray them just as people, like everyone else. He has to wash his car, they go traveling, they laugh, they play in the same way like anyone else. At the end of the day, I guess I wanted to humanize them.

BW: For us, you also sketched a broader living space, a whole region even. Did that happen by focusing on the band or were you deliberately sharing your perspective on Southeast Asia?

YWC: Sometimes, like when Faris is cleaning his car, I just decided to talk to him. But of course, there were some parts of the film where I wanted to show the outside world, the space that we live in, because what you see is a lot of them at home, in the studio or the places where they play their gig, right? And Malaysia is a multicultural society. It's very complex for us to explain to people the different layers in our society. I think through some of the images, especially when they're out in the city, we achieved that. I was very conscious about what I was filming to try to show the multicultural and multiracial space that we live in.

LR: What I really appreciate about QUEER AS PUNK is its quality as an optimistic public intervention. The film itself is not only a

record of their life, but it is very clear that you agree, whether explicitly or not, to have an agenda together and to express something to the world. Who do you imagine you are talking to?

YWC: I imagine the audience to be the LGBTQI+ communities, allies, and also people who are curious and open to understanding lives that are different from their own. I hope that the film creates a relationship built on empathy, understanding and action, where the audience feels inspired to reflect on their own beliefs and biases, and ultimately feels moved, informed, and empowered to advocate for equality, inclusivity, and acceptance.

LR: Have the band members themselves seen the film? How do you see it now that you have a little bit of distance to the production?

YWC: They're very happy with the film. And it was over five, six years that we filmed. It brings back a lot of memories for them. I think we're all very excited to see where the film goes because we have a purpose and the story should be heard.

LR: How did you edit this film with its music?

YWC: It was a conscious decision, which songs I wanted to feature in relation to each scene. Also, some of the songs work because of what we were facing at that time. During the COVID pandemic, the band wrote a song called "Horny & Broke". So that responds to the time in our lives. With the editing process, I did the initial rough cut for the Docs by the Sea editing lab. After that, Mandy helped me to find an editor in Indonesia to finish the film. It was very important that there's a fresh pair of eyes looking at the film because I was very close to the footage.

LR: You described that you started this project alone until the rough cut stage, and then the co-production started. What does this mean, actually, to enter into co-production in Southeast Asia?

YMC: Well, the Malaysian documentary industry is so niche, there isn't really any talent that could work on this film. I knew Mandy for a long time and we have the same taste. This is very important in a co-production. Indonesia and Malaysia are close enough, so we share some understanding about each other's society. When people think about co-production, they think about access to funding and things like that. My relationship with Mandy is not about funding but about sharing the same creative taste. Most importantly, we share the same passion to tell pressing stories and Mandy has done a lot of stories that are difficult to tell but need to be told.

BW: Would it offend you to be called an activist filmmaker – or how do you relate to your work?

YWC: I always say that I'm not an activist. I'm just a storyteller. I work with activists. I work with people who have stories to tell, important stories to tell. And my job, my position as the filmmaker is to translate it on screen for the lay audience to understand.

BW: For me, your film mirrors a lot of constraints that are building up in the region. I was intrigued when you mentioned the film labs. They seem to be of such an importance in regions where the structure of the film industry is less established or not at all. Did you have a chance to go to a film school? And then were you able to develop in the direction you wanted to?

YWC: I did go to film school in Australia, but when I came back, the industry mainly focused on TV documentaries, broadcast documentaries. We were very good at making these international broadcast documentaries, but the exposure to creative documentaries, and also the appreciation for creative documentaries is zero or non-existent. When I had a chance to attend film festivals overseas, I saw the kind of films that

inspired me to make my own films so that our local audience is able to see documentaries in a different light and not just the typical TV documentary.

LR: When society doesn't really accept individual choices, we sometimes lead a different life in public and in our personal spaces. Your film puts this into question. How did you manage to devise something very gentle and caring instead of othering?

YWC: I think it all comes down to what I said earlier about trust and empathy, about open and honest communication and being genuine because I am entering into my protagonists' personal space, their private lives. In the beginning I didn't know I was going to spend seven years with them. I learned from making my first feature that my life had to revolve around the protagonists because things happen and you just have to be there. For this film, I was working alone. I decided that I have to sacrifice some of my personal life. I've missed birthdays and funerals. I want a genuine relationship with my protagonists and it's reciprocal. We talked openly. We're still friends nowadays. Outside the film, we hang out. We support each other through the struggles in our personal lives. Maybe it's the mantra of how I want to live my life. That filmmaking is not just a job, but bigger than that, it's how I want to spend my life as a person in this world in the very short time that we have.

LR: I think this friendship is really cool and I can see that it's a very important currency in your work. But on the other hand, friendship can also stand in the way of a critical artistic look. How do you go about it?

YWC: That comes with trust and respect because they are creative artists and I am as well. We have our own processes and they respect the artist's work. They have given me that. What I do in return is that I always communicate openly and honestly about what I want to do, ask them how they feel about if I'm going to film certain things. There are days when they told me they don't want to be filmed. It's not that they say yes all the time. I don't think there is a textbook answer, 'cause every subject is different. The way that I approach my work is through honest communication and just being genuine.

LR: Coming from Indonesia myself, this is not always the easiest thing to do. Our society is all about harmony and trying to be nice, smiling even if our backs are broken. Why do you choose openness and honesty over being nice?

YWC: I can't explain it, it's just this gut feeling, something that I feel needs to be pursued. Of course, with experience, we catch on to what's a good on-screen character or what is a possible story, a journey. But the topic itself... I don't know how to answer this. I listen to the universe or something. I get asked this a lot of times, but I don't know. So far, every single film I've made, every single piece of reporting that I've done, has taught me to be a better person, to grow as a better person. I think I'll just keep heading in this direction.

BW: Awesome! What were the things you loved most about making QUEER AS PUNK?

YWC: It's the friendship. In the early days, I asked Faris, isn't he scared of anything? He's publicly out. He's been featured in the local media a little bit. He told me, "If you are going to be scared of everything, then you will never get to do anything." His courage really inspired me. I also cherish the moments of honesty and vulnerability when they open up. Moreover, I enjoy capturing the raw energy of their music, which is a form of rebellion and self-expression.

BW: Fantastic. What a great interview. Thank you so much.