



TOKILLA MONGOLIAN HORSE

A Film by Xiaoxuan Jiang

Countries of Production:

Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, USA

2024 - 97 min - Drama - Color

Mongolian, Mandarin Chinese

English Subtitles

World Sales:

Pluto Film Lehmbruckstr. 1 D-10245 Berlin Germany

Managing Directors:

Daniela Cölle & Benjamin Cölle

info@plutofilm.de +49 30 98 43 75 87

International Press:

Gloria Zerbinati
gloria.zerbinati@gmail.com
+33 (0)7 86 80 02 82

Production Companies:

Da Huang Pictures

33-3, Plaza Danau Desa, Jalan 1/109f, Taman Danau Desa, 58100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Tel: +6017-847 9612 dahuangpictures.producer@gmail.com **HUniche Pictures**

Unit 1021, Beverley Comm Centre, 87-105 Chatham Rd South, Tsim Sea Tsui Hong Kong Tel: +86 15848886199 hunichepictures@gmail.com









TO KILL A MONGOLIAN HORSE

a film by Xiaoxuan Jiang

Cast:

Hasa Undus, actor
Tana Qilemuge, actress

Saina Saina, actor

Father Tonggalag, actor

Old Beggar Qinartu, actor

Credits:

Directed by: Xiaoxuan Jiang

Written by: Xiaoxuan Jiang

Director of Photography: Tao Kio Qiu

Edited by: Zhong Zheng

Production Designer: Zongjian Hou

Sound Supervisor: Bobo Lau

Production Sound Mixer: Junyi He

Music: Unur

Financial Support from:

Asian Cinema Fund

Asian Project Market

Visual Industry Promotion Organization (VIPO)

White Light Studio

Sundance Ignite, a program of Sundance Institute

Hong Kong - Asia Film Financing Forum

Red Sea Fund, A Red Sea International Film Festival Initiative



Logline:

On the wintry steppes of Inner Mongolia, Saina, a herdsman by day and horseback performer by night, confronts the crumbling of a world he once knew.

Synopsis:

Saina tries to make ends meet as a herdsman in the wintery steppes of Inner Mongolia. While performing at night in breathtaking horseback shows, he by day takes care of his family's horses while juggling a grumpy father and his dysfunctional relationship with his ex-wife and kid. Unlike the majestic cavalryman he portrays in the show, Saina must discover how the world he grew up in has dramatically changed. An intimate portrait about masculinity in crisis from a female perspective.

Director's note:

The film is inspired by true events that occurred to my friend Saina, a Mongolian herder living in Inner Mongolia, a region in Northern China. Last year, I witnessed how the collective effect of a drought year and global warming aggravated the lives of many herders in the region. In order to find something more stable than herding, earlier that year, he found a job working at a local horse show doing horseback tricks.

During my visits to the horse show, I was struck by its hyper-masculine atmosphere, where traditional Mongolian masculinity was prominently featured in the performances. These male performers became objects of a fetishized gaze, celebrating not just their masculinity but also their ethnic identity. In the film, I cast Saina to play himself, portraying a character navigating between the horse show's world and his real-life struggles. As a series of events unfold, Saina starts to find the stark contrast between his performed roles and his actual circumstances unbearably irreconcilable...

This film offers a voice from modern Inner Mongolia, capturing the unique experience of ethnic Mongolian herders living on the Northern edge of China — with their Chinese and Mongolian identities, caught in the gradual shift from nomadic traditions to industrial realities.







Director's Interview

Why is the main production country Malaysia? How to define this film in a co-production sense? Why are there so many co-production countries?

Our main production country is Malaysia because our main production company, Da Huang Pictures, is a Malaysian production company established by our executive producer Tan Chui Mui. I also developed the screenplay in her writing workshop, under Chui Mui's mentorship.

I think the most accurate way to describe this film is: A Mongolian-language Malaysia co-production, OR a Mongolian-language Co-production. Sorry for so many M words, please don't get confused!

There are so many co-production countries because we took funding from a lot of institutions who were willing to support us. Even though many of the institutions did not require us to list them as production countries, we still did it out of gratitude for their contribution. We did this film in a truly indie way which would not be possible without the support from grants, funding, and private investments.



How did you came up with the idea of this film? What made you want to make this film initially?

The idea of this film came into existence at a very strange time in my life. In the summer of 2022, two years after I graduated from film school, I just got an offer for a 10 to 7 office job, and my film career had been stagnant for what seemed like forever. At the time, I had already submitted my thesis short film, *Graveyard of Horses*(2022), to dozens of festivals but never heard anything back. No sales agent was willing to take that short, despite me bombarding everyone with cold emails. At the same time, I was shooting a few short documentaries on the side, which were all going nowhere. And what's more: I was at an age when Chinese parents would start to get anxious over when you'll get married and have babies.

Despite all that, the decision was not hard for me. I turned down the office job offer for my "doomed" documentary projects. I was not a very organized documentary filmmaker, and I always found myself not able to catch those decisive moments on camera. Most of the time, I was a one-person team, going around trying to capture things following my intuition. Despite being quite a fruitless documentarian, those failed attempts eventually led me to something interesting in September of 2022.

My friend Saina is a herdsman and horseman in Inner Mongolia, a region in Northern China where a significant Mongolian population historically and currently lives. In September, I saw him posting videos of his new job as a horseback performer at a horse show. I was surprised by this unexpected professional change and asked him about it. He invited me over to watch the show.

I visited him there and was immediately blown over by his different personas backstage and on stage. Outside the show, Saina would complain to me about how bad the drought is and how he's having financial difficulties, but once he and the other performers get dressed up, they somehow just magically become this classic image of Mongolian heroes.

The show was a very successful tourism project, featuring some typical Mongolian hero's journey story arc. The audience was mainly Han Chinese tourists from other provinces.

That day on the stage, I saw Saina and the other performers doing very stunning, dangerous tricks on horseback. It's a life on a tightrope indeed. The performances were stunning. Saina was smiling on stage the way he'd never smile in real life. Yet, to me, there's this subtle irony that adds a layer of ambiguity to this spectacular scene.

After the show, Saina returned to his ranch in the pastures to sell his sheep. He could no longer afford to keep the sheep, but he insisted on keeping his horses no matter how much he needed money. Back in his ranch, in his yurt, we talked for hours about why he made this transition and about just everything going on in our lives.

I didn't know what it was, but I felt that I saw something very transient, very delicate in him. And I was very sure that if I didn't capture this "something" when it still existed, it would soon disappear and my friend would go down this downward spiral leading into some unknown abyss.

I was so eager to capture that process, those moments of changes on a medium that'd outlast us, in hopes that maybe the future generations could see how we once lived and how things came to be. I also had the vague hope of changing the outcomes of our futures by re-writing and re-imagining our present. That's why I wrote a story that's very similar to Saina's journey but at the same time a fictional story.



How did you find your protagonist? How does he differ from the typical image of a Mongolian man?

I got to know Saina in 2021 when we were looking for mud houses on the steppes as locations to shoot my short film. And Saina happened to have two mud houses. Though we did not end up using his house as the location, he volunteered to be our location manager and eventually became our production manager on set.



At the time when we were doing pre-production for the short, he just gotten divorced and was taking care of a one-year-old baby by himself. So in between our locations scouts, sometimes he'd have to go back to his parent's home and feed the baby boy, Namuuhan, who plays the role of Saina's son in the film. So my initial memory of him was this meticulous man who's good at taking the nurturing role, not the stereotypically macho type.

There's two languages in the film, Mongolian and Mandarin Chinese, in what cases are each used?

In the Inner Mongolian region of Northern China, especially in the pastoral areas, many ethnic Mongolians are bilingual, with Mongolian as their mother tongue and Mandarin Chinese as second language. Taking Saina as an example, he is fluent in Mongolian and Mandarin Chinese, and he also speaks a local dialect of Mandarin Chinese. So among members within the local Mongolian community, the default language would be Mongolian. In cases when people need to do transactions online or interact with people outside of the circle, they'd use Chinese as the official language instead. For example, in the film, such cases apply with the gas station worker, the horse stable HR lady, host of the horse race, horse buyer, seller, and etc.



Tana(Saina's ex-wife) is the only prominent female character throughout the film, yet every scene she appears in carries some significant narrative weight. Why did you design it like that?

In designing this character, it was very important for me to present her duality, the split between her public and private self. This seems to be a common theme for both her and Saina. I wanted her to be a "badass lady" yet a very human person in her own room; she can smoke in distress and badmouth her boss with her good-for-nothing ex-husband, haha. They can argue for every other thing, but they are like comrades when it comes to badmouthing Tana's boss.

Maybe she wants to reach a higher place in her male-dominated workplace and, therefore, has to act a certain way in front of her boss and clients; that is a humiliating female experience that's sometimes not understood by her male colleagues or her male family members. However, to me, in the end, when Saina, a "performer" in his own realm, watches Tana singing for her boss, at that moment, he becomes her in a way and decides to share that humiliation in an act of passive resistance.

The horse show and the pastures are both hyper-masculine environments. Why did you designed it like this? How do you view these hyper-masculine settings as a female director?

My previous short film, *Graveyard of Horses*(2024), featured a narrative that very much centered on the experience of a pregnant herder woman living on the steppes. When I wrote *To Kill A Mongolian Horse*(2024), many people were surprised at how the narrative focused instead on a male struggling in a hyper-masculine world.

To me, this is not surprising at all. I am quite an intuitive writer, following characters whose unique narratives make me see the beauty of the human experience, regardless of their gender. We cannot fully value female perspectives if we are only allowed to tell stories about the female experience. In fact, I'd love to see the feminine gaze being projected on male bodies, on patriarchal structures, and on misfits who struggle in any pre-existing systems.

A lot of the problems in our current world are caused by the excessive propagation of masculine energy. Such energy manifests itself through the exploitation of natural resources, human resources, endless quests for material gains, and the disregard of spirituality and the force of nature, which are often associated with the feminine side. Maybe this is a signal for us to respect the feminine side in us, because no one can thrive in a barren, hyper-masculine world.

Snow is an important element in the story. Did you use any VFX? Which part of it was real snow? What was your intention for the scene in the blizzard?

The only shot in which we used VFX snow was the scene of Saina and his father standing next to the window and there's snow falling outside. Everything else was real snow, including the blizzard scene. I'm not sure if other filmmakers would shoot in a real blizzard, but in our case, it was the only possible option for our budget.

We were expecting some snow based on the weather broadcast. On the day, initially there was no snow at all, but suddenly it became a blizzard within an hour. We had great difficulties driving back to the road after shooting that scene because everywhere was covered in a sheet of white mist. You can't even see beyond 2 meters in front of you.

The lucky thing was that we shot the scene on Saina's family's pasture land. And he knew how to get back to the road even with his eyes closed, I suppose. Our production designer was driving another car delivering some supplies when the blizzard came and he immediately lost his way. He was only able to find his way again after encountering a herder's home.

That scene was extremely hard to shoot. Saina also found the weather to be extremely harsh despite being a herdsman for decades. I wouldn't advise anyone to shoot in a blizzard like this unless you really know the land and respect the power of nature.



Why this film title, To Kill A Mongolian Horse?

Initially, the name reminded people of "To Kill A Mocking Bird," but it actually had nothing to do with the book. When I was writing the story, I found that there were many places in the script where Saina's friends or people in the community would sell their horses. The local Mongolian horses are the native breed of Eurasian steppes. They are essentially wild horses, roaming everywhere though most of them belong to someone. They can survive in very harsh conditions, maybe that's why the Mongolian cavalry succeeded in battles. However, since they are so great in numbers, when their owners sell them, they usually end up being sold as meat in the market. So in that sense, there is the actual killing of the Mongolian horses that exists in the story. And of course, the killing also carries a metaphoric sense. And with the "to kill" instead of "kill," I think it also adds an interesting layer, questioning if we really have any agency in the matter of "kill or not to kill". Do things surrounding the protagonists have the power to determine which way he should go? Does he have the power to determine his own future?



Director's Biography



Xiaoxuan Jiang is a writer-director born in Inner Mongolia, China. She received her BFA in Film & TV from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

Her narrative short "Graveyard of Horses" (2022) was selected for PÖFF Shorts, SXSW '23, and BFI '23. It won the NETPAC Award at the Busan International Short Film Festival, the Grand Prix Award at the Hiroshima International Film Festival, and Best Student International Short at the 46th Denver Film Festival.

Her first feature, "To Kill A Mongolian Horse" (2024), was supported by Sundance Ignite and received the script development fund from BIFF's Asian Cinema Fund (ACF), the VIPO award, the Sørfond award at the Asian Project Market (APM), and the White Light Post-production Award at HAF.

Page 17

Filmography

Feature Length Film "To Kill A Mongolian Horse" (2024)

- 2024 HAF Financial Forum WIP Project White Light Post-Production Award
- 2023 Sundance Ignite Fellowship
- 2023 BIFF's Asian Cinema Fund(ACF), Recipient of Script Development Fund
- 2023 Asian Project Market(APM), Recipient of VIPO Award and Sørfond Award
- 2023 FIRST Intl. Film Festival Financial Forum

Short Film "Graveyard of Horses" (2022)

Awards:

- 2023 Busan International Short Film Festival NETPAC Award
- 2023 Hiroshima International Film Festival Grand Prix Award
- 2023 Ningbo International Short Film Festival Best Short Film
- 2023 46th Denver Film Festival Best Student International Short
- 2022 Etiuda&Anima Intl. Film Festival Bronze Dinosaur Award

Selected:

- 2022 Pöff Shorts(Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival)
- 2023 South by Southwest(SXSW)
- 2023 BFI London Film Festival
- 2023 Edmonton International Film Festival
- 2023 OFF Odense Intl. Short Film Festival
- 2023 In the Palace International Short Film Festival
- 2023 London Short Film Festival
- 2023 Pingyao International Film Festival
- 2022 Nowness Short Film Talents Awards

Producer: Zhulin Mo

Zhulin Mo is a Beijing-based producer. She received her MS.Ed and M.Phil in Counseling Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. She produced several films, including the short I Have No Legs, And I Must Run(2022), which won Best Short Film at the 2022 BFI London Film Festival, short Graveyard of Horses(2022), which was officially selected for Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival'22, SXSW'23, BFI '23, and won the NETPAC Award at the Busan International Short Film Festival. Feature film Sukhavati (2024), was world premiered at 2024 Shanghai International Film Festival. To Kill A Mongolian Horse (2024) is funded by BIFF's Asian Cinema Fund and Sundance Ignite Fellowship, and the winner of VIPO Award and Sørfond Award at BIFF's Asian Project Market 23, White Light Post-production award at HAF 24. To Kill A Mongolian Horse will be world premiered in the 81st Venice International Film Festival. She focused on producing films with curiosity, a sense of humor, and a sense of social responsibility.

Executive Producer: TAN CHUI MUI

At the age of 5, Tan Chui Mui made a small wooden stool. At 8, she drove a pick up truck onto a column. At 9, she printed a children's magazine. At 12, she finished reading an Encyclopedia. At 17, she had a column in a student weekly paper. At 21, she received a computer animation degree. At 27, she made her first film Love Conquers All. At 38, she gave birth to a child. At 41, she decided to learn martial arts.

Tan Chui Mui was born in Kuantan, Malaysia in 1978. Her first feature film 'Love Conquers All' (2006) won the New Currents Awards and FIPRESCI International Critics' Award at the Busan International Film Festival and won Tiger Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. Her short film 'Everyday Everyday' (2009) won the top prize at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival. She was invited to the Cannes Cinefondation Residency, and she was a mentor for many filmmaking workshops. In 2015, she initiated Next New Wave, a brand under NNW Films to design and organize filmmaking related workshop, aims to provide young film talents in Malaysia a platform to learn directly from renowned filmmakers in the region. In 2017, she started SeaShorts, a film festival that focuses on showing Southeast Asian short films. Her recent film 'Barbarian Invasion' (2021) won the Jury Grand Prix of Golden Goblet Awards at the Shanghai International Film Festival. Her first art exhibition, 'Just Because You Pressed the Shutter?' (2022), exhibits a series of AI-generated images, won the Jimei x Arles Discovery Award, and was invited to exhibit at the Rencontres d'Arles International Photography Festival. Her second art exhibition, 'You Don't Know What Love Is' (2024), launched in France, China and Malaysia this June.

