

Interview with Mr Jack Neo and Dr Winston Hwang from the Cast of Local Production "I Not Stupid"

By Dr Tan Hooi Hwa, Krysanja Tan and Regina Chin

I Not Stupid's box-office takings of \$3.75 million has earned it the title of Singapore's second-highest grossing local film, next in place to another Jack Neo movie *Money No Enough*, which earned \$6 million.

Written and directed by the multi-talented Jack Neo, who also acts in the movie, *I Not Stupid* is a social commentary that examines Singapore society, its definitions of success and the pressures of keeping up with these social expectations, particularly in the area of education. With its combination of laughs and tears, the film has engaged its audience in the reality of social issues facing Singaporeans. *I Not Stupid* revolves around the lives of three boys (*Liu Kok Pin*, *Terry Khoo* and *Ang Boon Hock*) and their parents. Their struggles are set against the backdrop of streaming in local schools and the stigma endured by the 10-year old boys who are EM3 students and hence branded as "stupid". The other themes in the movie, such as government policies, foreign talent and society's "underdogs", have also touched both adults and Singapore's "heartlanders" with familiar everyday scenes that one can easily identify with.

As doctors, and for those of us who have watched the film, *I Not Stupid* vividly portrays how the stress and anxiety of daily living can impact negatively on one's health and disease. Indeed, the Health Promotion Board has been running a series of advertisements with tips on how to cope with stress and managing one's time and expectations. Stress among our children, the main theme in the movie, is

also increasingly a concern in Singapore. In an article in the Straits Times Life Section on 10 April 2002, Consultant Psychiatrist Dr Daniel Fung (who is also on the SMA News Editorial Board) advised, "Most children are quite resilient but some are more prone to emotional distress. They need to be identified and given some leeway to develop at their own pace."

It was while watching the movie, that those of us who already knew Dr Winston Hwang personally (he was not even identified as a medical doctor in the film's credits) recognised him in the role of the advertising firm's CEO. Thus we had approached Dr Hwang to do an interview about his experience, which we felt would be very interesting to share with our readers. Dr Hwang in turn, felt that the interview would be more relevant if we also included input from Jack Neo himself. Many thanks to Dr Winston Hwang's (WH) lead and subsequent arrangement, the SMA News (SMA) interviewed both him and Jack Neo (JN) on their experiences with the film *I Not Stupid* (INS).

SMA: Thank you very much, Dr Hwang for making this interview possible and for hosting the session at your lovely house. For a start, perhaps you might like to tell our readers how you got a role in INS and what were your acting experience/aspirations before this?

WH: I happened to be at the "right" place at the "right" time! I had casually commented to Jack that I was a "banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside". He thought that my English-educated background and the way I spoke was in character with what he had in mind for the movie, so he created the CEO role and invited me to audition for it. Prior to INS, I did not have any acting experience.

SMA: Was there any experience that you brought over to your role in the movie from your years of "acting" doctor and seeing the drama of life as a family physician in the HDB heartland?

WH: As I run my own clinic, I was able to get into my role as the CEO of the advertising firm. My upbringing and life experiences came in useful for my role as the English-speaking boss who could not identify with Mr Liu, the Mandarin-speaking copywriter, played by Jack. Certainly, INS addresses the gulf between the English and Chinese-educated, the latter often being perceived as the underdog. As a doctor practising in the "heartlands", I can also identify with the everyday scenes and people that were so insightfully portrayed in INS, such as the confused child, the rebellious child, and the rich and overbearing parents.

SMA: Were you paid for your role in INS? Do you have any plans to further your creative side?

WH: No and no. I only want to be a good doctor and retire...melt into anonymity.

SMA: Thank you very much, Jack, for agreeing to be interviewed by the SMA News. We would also like to congratulate you on the success of your movie. There were issues in INS, which we felt our readers could identify with. Perhaps you would like to tell us where you drew inspiration for the characters and script? Were there any particular incidents or experiences that inspired you to write about children and the HDB heartland?

JN: After my last movie *That One Not Enough*, I had thought the movie industry was getting dull. Although there was the occasional local production, I found them amateurish. So I decided to do another movie to liven up the industry. My inspiration for INS came from an Iranian movie "Children of Heaven" that my wife and I watched. It was really good and very touching. After that, I decided to do a movie on Singapore's children. However, someone commented that unlike

About the interviewees:

Dr Winston Hwang (MBBS, 1987) is a family physician operating his own clinic in the HDB "heartlands".

Jack Neo is an acclaimed director, writer and actor of local films. His previous credits include *Money No Enough*, *Liang Po Po* and *That One Not Enough*. He is also fondly remembered for his gender-bending *Liang Po Po* in earlier Chinese variety shows.

About the interviewer:

Dr Tan Hooi Hwa, MBBS (Monash), MMed (Int Med)(S), FAMS, graduated in 1973. He is a consultant physician in private practice and also an appointed member of the Singapore Medical Council.



L-R : Dr Tan Hooi Hwa and Jack Neo

Iranian children who do not even have shoes, our children are very lucky because they have everything. Moreover, I knew it was not easy to find suitable topics and INS could have easily become a children's drama. I did not want to spend money to do a movie to entertain children only. It had to be a movie that everyone could enjoy and talk about.

While talking to some parents, the issue of the increasing incidence of children committing suicide came up. Psychiatrists also told me that this is a serious problem in Singapore. Especially after streaming in schools was introduced, life for children changed and many problems arose. This is not something that all parents can understand.

While researching for the movie, I found that there were a lot of problems with Singapore's education system. Schools and parents also added to the problems. For instance, when a child performs badly in school, he is often threatened that he would have to "sweep floor" when he grows up. He is made to believe that his performance in school would determine whether he is successful later in life. But I do not agree with this view - I have a friend who is earning big money running a cleaning company!

SMA: *Did you intend the film to be a social commentary? What social messages did you want to highlight?*

JN: I hope that INS can tell parents not to neglect their children's other talents. Academic grades are not everything. Even one of our Ministers had said that everyone has an EM1 and EM3 in him. For example, you could say Dr Hwang had an EM1 in Medicine and EM3 in the creative arts.

What many INS movie-goers might not realise, is that love is also a very important theme throughout the entire movie. When we scold our children, they feel unwanted and unloved, and this can be very damaging for their self-esteem. *Kok Pin* tried to end his life because he felt his rattan-wielding mother did not

love him. Yet, it was love that drove *Mrs Liu* to cane her son, and she would feel terrible each time after she did it. Later, when *Mrs Liu* was so weak with cancer that she could barely sit up, *Kok Pin* wished that she would recover and have the strength to cane him again.

However, I was also concerned about the effect that *Kok Pin's* suicide attempt might have on children. Hence, I included that short scene where *Mr Liu* told his son that suicide was not the answer to the latter's problems in school. Love can be shown in many different ways and it is important that we show our children that we love them, and that they understand that we do.

I have a friend who when asked how "big" his son was, gestured with his arms outstretched to his sides, indicating a horizontal length. It turned out that he always worked so late that when he reached home, his son would already be fast asleep in bed. Hence, he only knew how "long" his son was!

WH: A few of my patients have asked me why my clinic was not opened for longer hours. I would always give them this standard reply, "I do not want my children to grow up calling me 'uncle'." This usually stumps them.

SMA: *How long did you spend researching for the movie and writing the script?*

JN: Two years. Between the first and the thirteenth scripts, there were a lot of redrafting, checking on accuracy of scenes filmed and talking to various people. In a

poignant scene, *Terry* donated his bone marrow to *Mrs Liu*. I had filmed that scene after talking to various doctors who had said it was not a problem for children to donate their marrow. Then, after the scene was filmed, someone from another hospital told me that it was not medically advisable for children to do so! Having filmed the scene, I was stunned. A few days later, the person called back to apologise that she had given me the wrong information, and clarified that as long as the child was not underweight, it would not be a problem. As you know, *Terry* is a fat child, so all turned out well in the end. I guess the number "13" was my lucky number!

SMA: *The movie made several references and even critical observations of government policies and our paternalistic state. Were you surprised that these were passed by the censors?*

JN: Initially, I was. However, I think the atmosphere in Singapore has changed nowadays. If you look at today's programmes, such as *Talking Point*, where the public are encouraged to call in and air their views, including criticisms, this is done live with no censorship. Also, the commentaries in the *Straits Times* and *Zao Bao* are also getting sharper. But I think we should look more closely at the common



L-R : Jack Neo and his wife, Irene, Dr Joyce Liang and Dr Winston Hwang

theme running through all these feedback: people just want society to improve. They are concerned and want to bring issues to the attention of the authorities.

The problems have always been there and did not suddenly appear, for example, our education system. However, people only take notice infrequently. I had hoped that INS, by creating mass awareness, would get everyone, including the authorities, to take notice of current issues, talk about them more regularly and address them for the good of society. It was not my intention to poke fun at

anyone. I just wanted to show reality as it is.

SMA: Now that the movie has been well received and acclaimed, have you had to sign many autographs? Do you avoid crowded places now that you are easily recognisable?

WH: Some of my patients recognised me when they watched the movie and during medical consultation, would spend two to four minutes more in the room talking to me about the movie. The queue at my clinic is certainly longer now – not because I have more patients but because of longer “consultation” time per patient!

Some of my friends, including fellow doctors, have also called me up after seeing me in INS.

JN: I still have my meals in the usual crowded places; I can observe more people, listen to what they are talking about, and get more ideas for my movies! ■

The SMA News wishes to thank Mr Jack Neo and Dr Winston Hwang for agreeing to the interview. A big thank you also to Dr Winston Hwang and his wife, Dr Joyce Liang for making this interview possible and for being such gracious hosts throughout the entire evening.