

Bo Knows

words by **Aaron Stewart-Ahn**

portrait by **Doug Kim**

pics courtesy of **China Film Group and United Star Corp.**



When you first spot Huang Bo onscreen you can be forgiven for assuming he's just playing a bit part. First of all, there's his ordinary, lovable face-gruff and childish all at once. Then there's the mesmerizing quality of his performances, so uncannily in tune with the characters that they seem effortless. Skyrocketing to fame and earning Golden Horse awards on the backs of enormous, mega-hit sleeper comedies like *Crazy Stone* and *Crazy Racer* with director Ning Hao (who first mistook him for an actual migrant worker), Huang plays a unique brand of comedy that is firmly grounded in humanity. It's best represented by his staggering, heartbreaking performance in *Cow*, in which he shares most of his scenes with a stubborn bovine. The future will see him reunite with Ning for "sort of a Western," in which he'll play a super-cool assassin.

Despite being a bona fide celebrity in Asia, Huang insists on immersing himself in regular life to stay true to his art. After meeting him at the New York Asian Film Festival, where he accepts a Rising Star of Asia Award, the last time I see him is in the West Village at 3 A.M., standing on a street corner hailing cabs in a soccer T-shirt and jeans. One of the world's greatest working actors has remained invisible.

GR: In the United States, comedic actors don't get a lot of respect from award givers. Is that situation much different in Asia? Was it unusual to win a Golden Horse given your background as a comedian?

HB: I've been asked that before, and a lot of my peers, for example, Jim Carrey or Stephen Chow, have never won huge awards. But they're great actors.

At the start, my film career was bad, but my music career was worse.

And although winning awards is great, it's not a reason for acting. I act to make audiences happy and help them enjoy their lives. I've never considered myself a comedic actor. I consider myself an audience's actor, and I hope it always remains that way. I do a lot of roles that aren't comedies and may not be as high profile to keep focused and be as well-rounded an actor as I can be.

GR: What's your opinion on the idea that most comedians are essentially sad people at heart?

HB: I've heard that before, and I've also heard that many comedic actors are very quiet in person—like Stephen Chow. Maybe they're saving their comedic energy for a burst on camera? I don't think about such things. I just try to remain a normal human being. What I do find comedic is that I'm successful to begin with. Life is pretty funny.

GR: So there's just the craft of acting, and no real difference to you...

HB: Exactly.

GR: How did you prepare for the part of a peasant in 1937 for *Cow*?

HB: It was a really challenging role. I've played modern peasants before, but never a peasant in 1937. So I started with previous experience, and then I have some relatives who are rural, so I started thinking about them a lot. And in modern China, most of the laborers you meet have similar backgrounds. They come from small towns to the big city. Once I had those observations and that base character borrow from, I started to enrich it, add to it in my mind, and make it specific to the period and story.

GR: Your character in *Cow* feels so vivid and natural—like a real person. Yet you've said that the performance was actually quite broad and that you had to liven it up.

HB: Where we went to shoot the movie, there were a lot of rural people around. So I started to take things from this group and make them part of Niu Er's character. What I observed was that in reality a lot of these people are very quiet.

They don't express themselves in speech much. So I animated him some, to make it entertaining to watch at least, and that's where I strayed from reality. Then I had to scale it back, so it felt natural and I wasn't taking people out of the movie. You have to find a balance between entertainment and reality, and it's a huge challenge.

GR: Does it become harder to portray characters like this as your own life circumstances have changed and you're now a movie star? Does that lifestyle distance you from making honest observations?

HB: That's a very important point and something I really try to pay attention to. It's so important to go to the supermarket. To ride the subway. To go to a bar. Important to just be around people, because that's where the truth in many of these roles comes from: real people. So I make a very conscious effort to do that whenever I can. I go out a lot with my friends who aren't in the movie business.

GR: Observation of human detail seems very important to you. As you travel the world to go to festivals and to make films, have you noticed great differences in people from place to place?

HB: I see that people have different characteristics everywhere you go. It's very interesting for me to try and catch that. To me, when you watch a Chinese or an American movie, you get such a different feeling because of this. It really has to do with my past. Before acting, I was a traveling musician, so I was traveling even more back then. It took me everywhere in China.



Not just another man-meets-cow story.



Wheels on reels.

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A lot of my observations about people that I use today are based on what I learned and experienced over that long period of time.

GR: What years of your life were you doing this?

HB: It started in high school. I was into singing and choreography. I did that for about 10 years, traveling mostly as a choreographer. I was also a singer in a band named Blue Wind. I've also worked in a toy store, a factory, and owned a boutique.

GR: What precipitated the change from music to film?

HB: Just a very chance opportunity. A friend who was an actor called me up and asked me if I wanted to be in a movie. And somehow I was ridiculously lucky and won an award for that first film. At the start, my film career was bad but my music career was worse.

GR: And then you attended the Beijing Film Academy. Why is it that so much great filmmaking talent comes out of this one place?

HB: The great thing about that place isn't so much what you learn in the classroom. It's that it's a place where there are so many students passionately devoted to learning how to make movies. You talk, think, and dream about movies every single day. And you have the chance to go to classes every day on every aspect of the craft of filmmaking: production design, cinematography, editing. It was a great experience for me. I became a sponge and just soaked it all up. I really learned a bit of everything about filmmaking.

GR: Well, then, are you ever going to direct a film of your own?

HB: It's something I think about, but it really has to be the right thing at the right time.

GR: How did it feel to win the Rising Star award here at the New York Asian Film Festival?

HB: It's really nice to win awards and to have that recognition. It's encouraging. To win a Rising Star award is particularly encouraging because I'm not so young, and this is probably the last time I'll get to win a new artist award. I guess that means there's a lot of work ahead. 🐼

Huang Bo swears he's not funny in real life.

