

# THE TANG OF

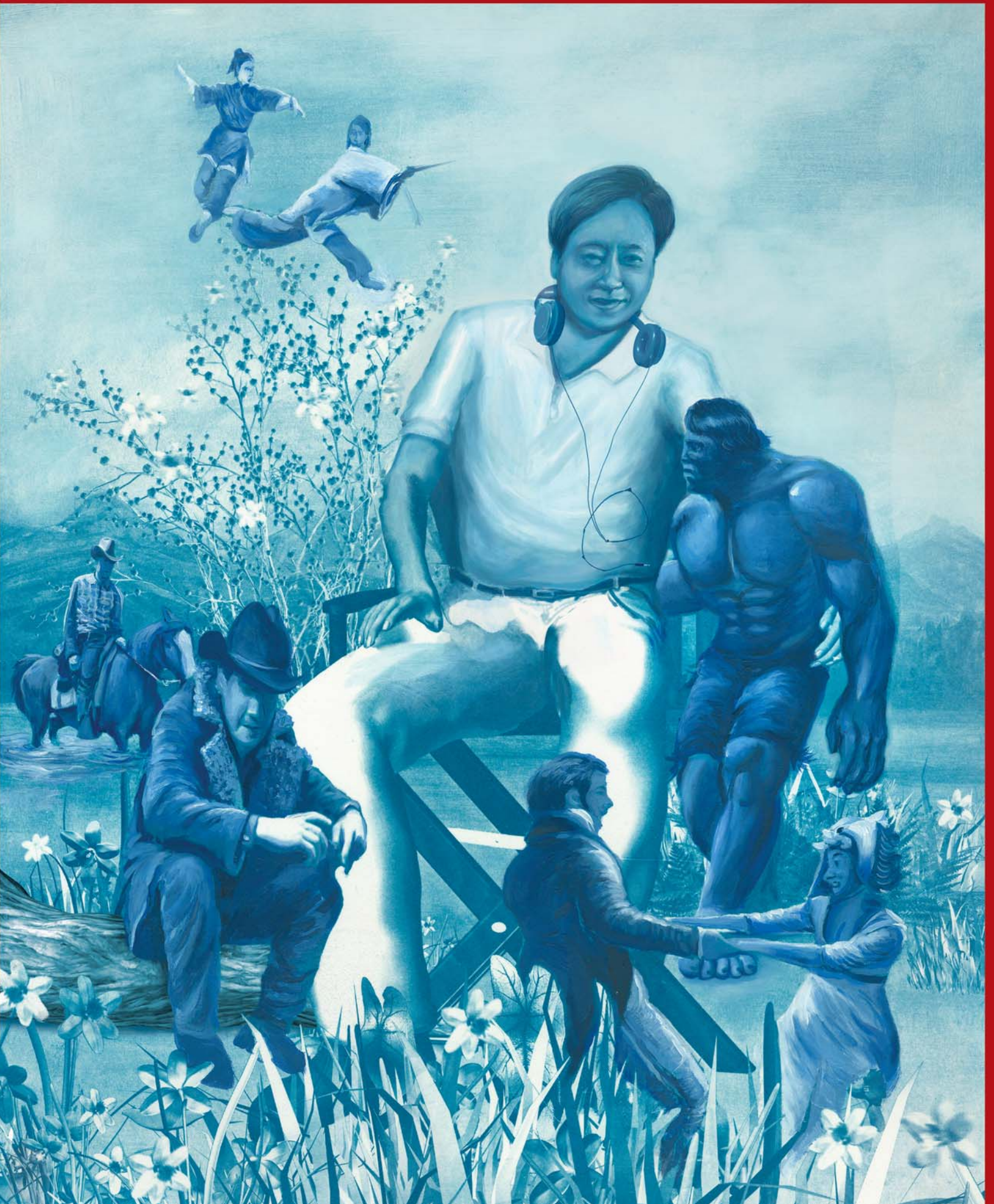
A CINEMATIC MASTER REVEALS  
THE SPIRIT THAT DRIVES HIM  
TO FOLLOW ROADS NOT TAKEN

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# TUCKED INSIDE A SCREENING ROOM IN THE MIDDLE OF TIMES SQUARE,

Ang Lee (TSOA'84, HON '01) watches a scene from his latest film, *Lust, Caution*, a racy spy thriller set in Shanghai during World War II. When the lights come up, the sound editor asks Lee what he thought, and the soft-spoken 53-year-old furrows his brow. Finally, he says, "Maybe the music was a little too loud against the dialogue." This tendency to process, to meditate rather than react immediately, is part of what makes the Academy Award-winning director one of film's most eclectic and exacting artists.

Ironically, it was an early, profound experience with failure that originally set him on the course to filmmaking. Lee's inability to pass Taiwan's college entrance exam—twice—steered him to art school in 1972 at age 18. At the National Taiwan University of Arts, he became enamored with music, dance, and theater, and made his first short on Super 8 film. And then one night, while walking in the rain after play rehearsal, he had an epiphany: He realized that he was different than others and had no choice but to devote himself to being an artist. "It was enlightening," Lee explains. "I felt this chill in my bones. I was lifted."

The decision didn't necessarily make life easy. His father was an old-fashioned disciplinarian, principal of one of Taiwan's best high schools, who put no value in artistic ventures. Having fled China with his wife in 1949 after the civil war, he stressed education and the Chinese classics. But when Lee

was accepted into the BFA theater program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, his father happily supported him, hoping he'd come to his senses after earning his degree. That didn't happen.

Upon graduation, Lee, who found film a more flexible medium than theater because of his limited English, applied to all the top American graduate schools—only gaining acceptance to NYU.

It's safe to say that those other admissions officers are still kicking themselves. After 10 acclaimed films and 59 international awards—including two Golden Globes, two BAFTAs, and two Independent Spirit Awards—Lee is lauded as perhaps the most versatile director from Hollywood to Bollywood. He wrote his first two scripts while working as a stay-at-home dad, eventually sending *Pushing Hands* (1992) and *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), both examinations of Chinese cultural and generational divides, to a Taiwanese government writing competition, in which he placed first and second, respectively. This success earned him a chance to direct both films, which were hits in Taiwan and the West. *The Wedding Banquet* and the subsequent Taiwanese family drama *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) both garnered Oscar nominations for best foreign film, which opened the door to more diverse directing gigs, such as the adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), the angst-ridden suburban meditation *The Ice Storm* (1997), and the Civil War tale *Ride With the Devil* (1999).

In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Lee crafted a sweeping martial arts epic with an art house sensibility. The picture earned 10 Oscar nominations, with four wins, and became the highest-grossing foreign film of all time. His split-screened, emotionally nuanced interpretation of *Hulk* (2003) also blazed trails in the conventional comic-book film tradition, but it was *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a story of forbidden love between two cowboys, that created the biggest stir. Infused with the glory of the most stunning Westerns, Lee staged a tale that had American critics and audiences talking all year. But the film almost didn't happen. Haunted by guilt for his negative depiction of the Hulk's father and frustrated by his uncharacteristically hot temper on the set, he flirted with quit-

ting the business after that movie. Sensing his son's depression and disillusionment, Lee's father actually encouraged him, for the very first time, to get back behind the camera.

While accepting the Academy Award for Best Achievement in Directing for the film, Lee said that *Brokeback* was about "not just all the gay men and women whose love is denied by society, but just as important, the greatness of love itself." He also made a special dedication to his father, who died



just as the movie began production: "More than any other, I made this film for him."

*NYU Alumni Magazine* recently spoke to Lee at Sound One Studios in New York while he put the finishing touches on *Lust, Caution*, which recently took the top prize at the Venice Film Festival and opened in theaters in September.

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**YOUR ENGLISH WAS QUITE LIMITED WHEN YOU STARTED FILM SCHOOL, BUT PEOPLE TOOK NOTICE OF YOU RIGHT AWAY. FELLOW STUDENT SPIKE LEE EVEN USED YOU AS AN ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ON HIS THESIS PROJECT. HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO ATTRACT EVERYONE'S ATTENTION?**

I'm normally a quiet person but when I direct, people tend to listen to me. You know, it's like gang members. It doesn't matter if someone is big or small. If you tell people what to do, and those people survive, they tend to listen to you. Same thing. After school I was doing little jobs for a Chinese TV crew. I would start out in the morning

as the lighting person, and by the afternoon, the director would be listening to me [laughs].

WHAT DID YOU SAY THAT MADE THESE PEOPLE LISTEN?

I don't know. Up to directing *Sense and Sensibility*, I could hardly finish a fluent sentence in English. And this was Jane Austen, with a top-of-the-line English cast and crew. How did I do that? It's hard to explain. But that gave me faith in moviemaking, that it's a universal experi-

PHOTOS FROM LEFT:

DESPITE THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*, THE TALE OF TWO STAR-CROSSED COWBOYS, PLAYED BY JAKE GYLLENHAAL AND HEATH LEDGER, EARNED LEE HIS FIRST OSCAR FOR DIRECTING.

USING COMPUTER-GENERATED IMAGERY, LEE TRANSFORMED ACTOR ERIC BANA INTO THE NOT-SO-JOLLY GREEN GIANT IN *HULK*, THE FIRST BIG-SCREEN ADAPTATION OF THE MARVEL COMIC-BOOK HERO.

THE RITUALS OF FOOD AND LOVE SPICE THE LIFE OF A CONTEMPORARY TAIWANESE FAMILY IN *EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN*, WHICH LEE CO-WROTE WITH LONGTIME COLLABORATOR JAMES SCHAMUS.



“MAKING MOVIES IS NOT ABOUT A STATEMENT, BUT RAISING INTERESTING QUESTIONS TO STIR UP THE [AUDIENCE’S] MIND.... MOVIES THESE DAYS, ESPECIALLY STUDIO MOVIES, THEY DON’T ALLOW PEOPLE TO THINK. TO ME, THAT’S A CRIME.”

—DIRECTOR ANG LEE

ence. It can penetrate cultural barriers, language barriers. There's something universal about sight and sound. It made me feel anything was doable. And like I belonged.

SO HOW DID THINGS CHANGE AFTER MAKING *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*?

After that, in terms of filmmaking, I was pretty well-grounded. I could face my father and say, 'I have a job.' I could sound like I knew what I was doing. But then I had to make *The Ice Storm*. I had to break that. It's like the Taoist saying: 'You have to change.' If you don't change, you're dead, you get stiff. That's a sign of decline and a big fear for me. I had fans who liked my movies, but you sort of have to break that contract with them. You have to remind yourself that making movies is about looking for freedom. It's risky, it's scary. Somebody will say, 'I loved *Sense and Sensibility*,' and then you pitch them *The Ice Storm* and they're like, 'What are you doing to me?' But if I don't do that, if I make *Sense and Sensibility*, and then [director John Madden's] *Shakespeare in Love* next, I feel it gets stiff.



**HOW MUCH DOES TAOISM INFLUENCE THE FILMS YOU CHOOSE TO MAKE?**

Being Chinese, I just naturally grapple with Taoist thoughts and self-doubt because there's always something three feet above your head—there's something watching, something bigger than you. So you're never sure about yourself because you're the little human, and what are we compared to the big natural laws? People think Taoism is pessimistic, that you just follow whatever, flow with the wave and do nothing. But nature takes its own course. You live, you die. You know, it never puts humanity first. Humanity is about how we fit in; it's not about conquering.

**YOU'RE KNOWN AS A GREAT BUT GENTLE LEADER ON SETS. DID YOUR FATHER, WHO**

temper. You know there's no escape, and now I have to repress that a little bit.

You don't want to just go barking at people to make them afraid of you. That's not me. You make people listen to you by reasoning. I think it takes greater confidence in yourself to tell people, 'Give me a moment' or 'I changed my mind' or 'I don't know what I'm gonna do yet. Wait a little bit and let me just sort it out.'

**YOU WERE A HUGE ADMIRER OF THE LATE INGMAR BERGMAN. HOW DID WATCHING HIS FILM *THE VIRGIN SPRING* CHANGE YOUR LIFE, AS YOU'VE SAID?**

That film put the doubt of God in me. I was 18 when I saw it, and it's brutal. It took away my innocence, so to speak.

was...I don't know how to describe it. It was beyond nice.

**IS THERE SOMETHING YOU'RE TRYING TO GIVE TO YOUR AUDIENCE, JUST LIKE BERGMAN GAVE TO YOU? ARE YOU TRYING TO MAKE THEM LEAVE THE THEATER WITH A CERTAIN FEELING?**

With doubt. I think it's embodied in me, and each movie. Making movies is not about a statement, but raising interesting questions to stir up the [audience's] mind. I think that's what movies should do. Movies these days, especially studio movies, they don't allow people to think. To me, that's a crime.

**SO YOU USUALLY LOOK FOR THOUGHT-PROVOKING SCRIPTS?**



**PHOTOS FROM LEFT:**

TO CREATE THE LYRICAL SWORD-FIGHTING SCENES—SOME OF WHICH TAKE PLACE ATOP SWAYING BAMBOO—IN *CRUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, LEE SUSPENDED ACTORS IN FLYING HARNESES.

LEE HAD NEVER READ JANE AUSTEN'S CLASSIC NOVEL *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY* UNTIL HE WAS SENT AN ADAPTATION BY BRITISH ACTRESS EMMA THOMPSON (ABOVE WITH HUGH GRANT), WHO TOOK HOME AN ACADEMY AWARD FOR HER SCREENPLAY OF THE 1995 FILM.

LEE CROSSED CULTURES WITH *THE WEDDING BANQUET*, WHICH HE CO-WROTE WITH SCHAMUS AND NEIL PENG, ABOUT A MANHATTAN MAN WHO STAGES AN ELABORATE MARRIAGE IN ORDER TO CONCEAL HIS HOMOSEXUALITY FROM HIS TRADITIONAL CHINESE PARENTS.

**WAS A HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, HAVE AN AFFECT ON HOW YOU MANAGE OTHERS?**

Starting with *Hulk*, when I would lose my patience, I [realized I] could have a big temper like my father [laughs]. He was a very stately man, very decisive. I didn't like how he would treat my mother sometimes. He was tough, very traditional. My wife, she dominates me [laughs]. She makes the rules, and she's smart and very independent. But somehow, like during *Hulk*, you realize the family genes are so strong. You've got the same physical problems; you get the same

I can't make a Bergman movie, but I realized then that movies could have that spirit in them. And just last summer [2006] I got to meet him. It was like a pilgrimage. He gave me a hug, and his hug was so motherly. It was very soft.... Thirty-five years ago this man took away my innocence, and now he's giving me a very motherly hug. It was like...life is okay.

**YOU MET HIM AS A FAN, BUT HE WAS PROBABLY A FAN OF YOURS, TOO.**

He loved quite a few of my movies, so that

Most scripts are built like battleships, unsinkable. They're for producers, for investors. They give you a lot of security, like, 'How can we go wrong with this? How big a schmuck can you be if you fuck that up?' [laughs] Most scripts I get are like that. You can go to war with them, but that's not for me. They're not interesting. They should be simple, but a lot of writers, they don't do that. That's why I work with James Schamus a lot, because his [scripts] are underwritten.

**YOU'RE KNOWN AS A SHY PERSON IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS AND HAVE CALLED FILMMAKING AN ESCAPE. WHAT ARE YOU HIDING FROM?**

Well, I'm just good at filmmaking. I'm not very good at, you know, being social [*laughs*] or a lot of other things. So, just naturally, if I'm making a film, it's positive reinforcement, and other things can be a negative reinforcement. I'm a daydreamer. I think a lot of creative people are like that. I don't know why I'm shy at parties. Maybe because I don't have enough knowledge to carry on an interesting conversation—unless it's related to filmmaking [*laughs*].

**I'M SURE A LOT OF PEOPLE WOULD DISAGREE WITH THAT.**

I don't know. But when it relates to film-



making, I get crazy. I get really fanatic about [film] research, and then I sound smart. That's a pleasure for me. I like making movies, and the rest of my life is rather boring. It's true.

**YOU'RE A UNIQUELY INTERNATIONAL FILMMAKER. WHAT DO YOU DO THAT MAKES YOUR STORIES APPEAL TO SUCH BROAD AUDIENCES?**

Whatever it takes to make a movie interesting, I'll do it. [For *Lust, Caution*] I have a French composer, a Mexican cinematographer, whatever works. And if the script doesn't go well, then James [Schamus], the American, will help out through translation. If you just make a film for a Chinese audience, you don't have to worry about who doesn't know the background. But if you think it's going out to the world, you have to think twice about it, you have to make adjustments. That I do.

**BUT IT SEEMS LIKE YOU TAP INTO SOMETHING ELSE THAT RESONATES ACROSS ALL AUDIENCES, A SENSE OF LONGING OR SEARCHING.**

Maybe it's because I drift around. My parents drifted from China to Taiwan, and then I came to the States, and now I go back to China, where things are changing. Taiwan's also changed. Things are constantly changed.

I was always on a losing side. It's easy for me to identify with losers because I've always had to adapt, I've always had to blend, and that's just my life. It's not like I'm American or Japanese or German, where you have very strong defining roots. I don't. My root is the tradition of Chinese culture, which [as a child] I never saw, I was only told.

**IS IT THIS THEME OF BEING ON THE LOSING SIDE THAT'S MOST RELATABLE FOR PEOPLE?**

There is something universal about that. I think through movies we try to discover truths about life. We use different materials, different channels to think about essential questions, deeper questions. This search for truth should be universal.

There's another thing that's universal about the film world today, which is different from when I was a student. There's more film consistency now; there's a crust of universality among the global art house lines. There's a certain standard taste you have to meet that is not a whole lot different from Japan to Brazil to China.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK CAUSED THAT?**

Well, we all learn from the same things. There's a global village, the information flows so fast now. The taste is less local I think at the film festival level, at the art house level.

**AFTER FLEEING CHINA, YOUR PARENTS WERE NEVER SECURE, EVEN ONCE THEY PROSPERED IN TAIWAN. IN THE FICKLE WORLD OF ENTERTAINMENT, DO YOU STILL GET THE FEELING THAT AT ANY MOMENT YOUR SUCCESS COULD COME TO A HALT?**

I've had a lot of goodwill, so I'm quite satisfied. Whatever happens, I'm just trying not to mess it up. I cherish it. But sometimes, when it comes to the Academy, I cannot say I don't really care [about success] because when you make a movie, you lead many people.

Everybody comes in with a dream, and I feel responsible to make everybody happy. So I still go as far as I can.

**HOW HAS BEING TAIWAN-BORN AFFECTED YOUR EXPERIENCE IN HOLLYWOOD?**

I thought, being Chinese, I had to be twice as good to get half as much. I just told myself that's probably what it's gonna be. It turns out it's not as hard [to be a Chinese director]. In some ways I feel lucky because I got help from the Taiwanese government—and my classmates from America, they didn't get help from the American government [*laughs*].

**ALIENATION AND REGRET ARE CENTRAL THEMES IN THE LIVES OF YOUR CHARACTERS. WHAT DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO LEARN FROM THIS?**

They have to deal with it. They have to face it. I think that's what [my] films suggest, because nothing is reliable, nothing stands still. My movies are all about certain systems, certain beliefs, certain relationships—the things that people try to hang on to, especially. They get disappointed in the end. It's like *Brokeback [Mountain]*; you never really get back to it, you just try.

**DO YOU CONSCIOUSLY TRY TO PUT THOSE SENTIMENTS INTO YOUR STORIES?**

They're just my feelings about life. I think the phrase that puts it best was by Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility*: It's personal free will versus social obligations. You have to fulfill obligations to be grounded, to relate to people, to live with other people, to feel their company so you're not lonely. But at the same time, you want to break from it because that's not freedom. In all my films, at the end of the day, it's like religion: You always look for the answer, for the ultimate freedom. What is the ultimate freedom? For me, it's making movies. With art, we try to break free, but there's no such thing [*laughs*]. Unless you choose to die, there's no freedom.

**YOU'VE SAID THAT YOU HOPE TO LIVE TO 300, SO YOU CAN KEEP MAKING MOVIES.**

**ARE THERE ANY PARTICULAR STORIES YOU'RE ANXIOUS TO TELL?**

I don't have a checklist. I like making movies, and I think I have a good appetite for it. I just want to keep learning. ■