

From the Chinese Diaspora to a Global Dream - A Discussion with Filmmakers Clara Law and Eddie Fong –ⁱ By Gina Marchetti

On March 25, 2010, filmmakers Clara Law¹ and Eddie Fong participated in a panel discussion devoted to their new films, the feature *Like a Dream* and the short *Red Earth* (which will screen at the Horizons sidebar of the 67th Venice Film Festival this year), both featuring actor Daniel Wu. *Like a Dream* had been shown at the Hong Kong International Film Festival on March 22. Both the feature and the short deal with the way in which the cinema can mediate the often slippery divide between reality and fantasy, the conscious and the unconscious mind, and the waking world and the realm of dreams. As the enormous popularity of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) shows, this theme holds a particular attraction for some of the world's most inventive filmmakers. In this conversation, Clara Law (who directed the film) and her partner Eddie Fong (who co-wrote the screenplay) talk about *Like a Dream* within the context of their careers which have taken them to places as diverse as Macao, Hong Kong, Mainland China, the United States, Germany, and Australia (where they currently reside).

(Photo provided by Clara Law)



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¹ **Links of Interest:**

-Clara Law <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/people.asp?id=212>

-Eddie Fong <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/people.asp?id=46>

-Like a Dream <http://www.hkcinemagic.com/en/movie.asp?id=11358>

-Visit <http://www.HKCinemagic.com> for more interviews, features and a database on HK cinema.

-Our Facebook page

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/WWWHKCINEMAGICCOM/300469787552?ref=mf>

The moderator Nancy Tong (NT) worked with them on *Farewell China* (1990), set in New York City. Staci Ford (SF) and Gina Marchetti (GM) have both written extensively on their films, focusing, in particular, on their treatment of gender, ethnicity, and diaspora in their “migration trilogy” (*Farewell China*, *Autumn Moon*, and *Floating Life*).

Panelists: Clara Law (CL), Eddie Fong (EF), Nancy Tong (NT, moderator), Staci Ford (SF) and Gina Marchetti (GM).

Chapter 1: Chinese Diaspora

Farewell China, 1990

Introduction

NT: I’m very happy to introduce to you my very old friends, Clara and Eddie. They happen to be here for the film festival. They are showing their films, *Like a Dream* and *Red Earth*. So I took this opportunity to invite them to come here and to meet with us and to talk about some of their films. I knew Clara since the mid-1980s. In 1985, we were in New York. Very young then...

CL: We’re still young...

NT: Still young...And we were working for a local community television station called “Apple TV”. It’s not related to the *Apple Daily*ⁱ here. Ok? It’s a lot more serious than that. We were both producing news and public affairs programs. In 1989, after June 4th, Clara and Eddie both came to New York, and they invited me to work with them on a project based on their research on the lives of Chinese illegal immigrants in New York. In that one very cold winter, we shot the film *Farewell China*, and we went all over New York City. For Clara, authenticity of film location is very important for her story, which made my job as a line producer very difficult. We had to find tenement apartments in Chinatown, a dark basement in Harlem, an old style Chinese laundry in Queens and a cheap hotel room in Midtown Manhattan, a totally abandoned parking lot in Alphabet City to stage a performance (a really bizarre performance), and also a church converted into a discotheque. We managed to find all these locations. Often, my “gweilo”ⁱⁱⁱ location manager, Jess, would come to me and say, “Nancy. What kind of a kinky film are you making? You’re picking some very weird locations!” Well...It’s not easy to explain to an all-American crew that this soft-spoken and tiny-framed Clara has visions more bizarre than Edgar Allen Poe. That floating in her beautiful head, there are these odd obsessive characters caught between cultures and cities in search of some abstract identities that are constantly shifting.

Since the making of *Farewell China*, Clara and I live on two separate continents separated by a vast body of water. It is not too often that I see her. But I always admire how she and her partner Eddie Fong, both writers and directors, have put out one excellent film after another. They have also crossed from fiction films to documentary films.

I'm not a cultural critic. Yet, fortunately, I have friends here in the University of Hong Kong who have written extensively on Hong Kong cinema and I've invited them to join us here to share with us their interpretations and appreciations on Clara's films. Staci Ford is an honorary associate professor in the Department of History, teacher and researcher on US cultural identities, histories and transnational American studies. She has been in Hong Kong since 1993 and published a book on Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale* (Hong Kong University Press, 2008) and is currently finishing a book on American women in Hong Kong. Sitting next to her is Dr. Gina Marchetti, associate professor in the department of Comparative Literature. She has published extensively on Chinese and Hong Kong cinema. Her recent book, *From Tian'anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens* (Temple University Press, 2006) has a chapter on Clara Law's three films on migration.

Without further delay, I'll give the floor to both of you.

Farewell China

SF: Thanks Nancy. It's an honor here tonight to meet Clara and Eddie. I've been lucky enough to write about Hong Kong film related specifically on the genre of migration melodrama. I've been looking at immigration and the migration melodrama by Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers—several of whom are women.

Nancy has introduced a little bit about *Farewell China*. It was made in 1990, and it begins in China but then moves to New York very quickly, following a husband and a wife. The wife, Li Hung, played by Maggie Cheung, comes first and basically her husband Nansang, played by Tony Leung, follows. But as he follows, he becomes aware of what she endures. Basically, she gets lost and says, "I want a divorce. Please divorce me." Then, she disappears and her husband tries to track her down. In the process of trying to find her, he has his own series of awakenings and becomes very aware of what it is that she has gone through.

The film is important in terms of women in diaspora and also very important in reversing stereotypes of the "bachelor society" that has so often been associated with Chinatown. This film places women's stories at the centre and integrates men's and women's stories. I think these films are early manifestations of third wave feminism's notion of intersectionality that looks at gender in conversation with race and class. They are in some respects theoretical interventions along the same line with the works of Gloria Anzaldua, and Alice Walker in terms of African American feminism and Latina feminism. I really do think these films stand along side other sorts of

feminist texts. But, then they address larger issues of diaspora and connect history as well.

In terms of thinking about history, there have been lots of debate about this film and the way it presents immigration. I'm less worried about whether this is an accurate representation and more interested in the way that it captures an immediate post-Tiananmen moment and pre-1997 moment. It also captures certain USA anxieties about immigration in this period and it connects US, Chinese and Hong Kong history. The obvious question for me to ask Clara and Eddie is twenty years on, how do you feel about this film and the question of history, your personal history and the logic of representation of different histories in the film.

EF: Just then when I was watching this clip [referring to a scene featuring the Chinese couple's reunion in New York City], I was almost in tears. I don't know why. I haven't seen this in twenty years.

CL: I don't think we have seen it since it was done. We don't normally go back to watch our own films. I cringe when I go back to watch it. I saw so many imperfections, and I want to make it better.

EF: But emotionally, there is truth in it. That's why just watching that clip, I felt really touched. It called back all these emotions during that period of time when we made the film.

CL: We finished the script before the Tiananmen Square massacre. We were planning to do it in New York. Then on that night when it happened, I could still recall very clearly that image and that moment. We were sitting at home. I think during that time a lot of us, if you were going to work, you would try to get back home as soon as possible just to see what's the latest, what was happening, and what's going on. We were at home. We were watching the news and then it happened. The light went off and then you heard the sound. We couldn't believe it. I think we were crying. I said something like "I feel so ashamed of being Chinese." I had that very strong emotion that has to be channeled into something. Then we changed the ending of the film, and it was this ending you see now.

EF: During that cold month in May, we were just stuck at home, watching the television and watching the news. We just couldn't do anything. We just had to put down the script. We couldn't move on. I think that's the first time we faced the reality that even though we've been trying to portray the reality, there is no way we can transfer what we felt about that reality into our film. We found that we were so helpless. As filmmakers, we couldn't do much about that. Even though right now we changed the ending, but still I don't think we have really transferred that emotion into the film. But, as like Clara said, it's a relief. Still, it is not that actual feeling at all. It's much stronger and bigger than what you saw in the film.

CL: And, then, of course, you know how many years now - twenty-one years on? We are not historians. We've moved from one phase to another. When we immigrated to Australia, we did *Floating Life*. For us, *Floating Life* was like a transition between Hong Kong and Australia --between staying in a totally Chinese environment and the

multicultural world. At the time we felt Australia was very multicultural. It was a transitional phase. I think *Floating Life* is a bit more optimistic. Because somehow I think I found a place for myself and that place was that I accepted the fact that I've these eastern and western elements in me. I will be the bridge. That's what I am.

EF: I think when we first worked on *Farewell China*, the original title was "Love after the Revolution." That's the original title, but that's too political. We just had to disguise it with a love story. So, the Chinese title is "Love in the Season of a Foreign Land" or something like that. We did this because of the market in Hong Kong. Our investors thought it's too political. Nobody wants to watch a political film.

CL: And they were right.

EF: Oh yes. They were right. But at the time we were trying to explore. There is one question we always want to ask: "Why do the Chinese always have to go to overseas, and why do they have to move out from their own country?" This is the question we ask ourselves. This is the question we try to find the answer to in our films and we try to explore this. So we went to New York to do the research. But, at that time, we didn't expect the Tiananmen Square massacre would happen. So, at the end of the film, we just shifted the focus onto its symbol.

SF: Eddie is talking about the Goddess of Democracy, which was a temporary monument in Chinatown. It's interesting to know how many Hong Kong films in the genre end up being changed at the last minute because history intervenes. I'm thinking about Evans Chan's *Bauhinia* being one thing before September 11, then becoming something else after. I think that's a story that's fascinating.

The Law/Fong partnership

SF: I wanted to ask you about your partnership. I think your collaboration is interesting and important for a number of reasons, but mostly because I think you take gender issues very seriously without being overtly dramatic or stereotypical in any way. I am just curious to know about the Law/Fong partnership and how have you two bonded in previous years? How does your partnership matter for this type of film that puts diaspora and relationships and history center stage?

CL: First of all, I never feel that, being female, I'm a female director. That has never come up. Because I always feel that in every person, there is always the femaleness and maleness. It just depends on the make up. Sometimes in a male, the femaleness may be more than the maleness, and vice versa. I think our collaboration is always about the story, the issue, the theme, and the characters. Those are the things that we've talked about and discussed. Probably we've also moved on now to something else. But the way we work...I suppose you know I'm a very intuitive person; Eddie has intuition but at the same time he is also more analytical. Somehow we complement each other. I suppose that's the only way to describe it. Of course you know we have arguments. But the most interesting thing is that whenever we argue,

the strongest argument we had (when I say strongest, we felt we wanted to kill each other) is when we found a way out. It's a certain thing that happens in the script, you need a changing gear, a turning point, finding a new way to continue to play that script. So it had all been very positive. If we have arguments, it is in a way to improve the script. And it's never personal. When we have arguments, we don't carry it into our dinner or whatever. We are very aware that we have different roles and different hats. When we take that hat off, that's set.

EF: Split personalities!

SF: I want to know how it feels to be a sensitive new age guy in a Hong Kong film sector where so much is made of patriarchy, not that it's limited to Chinese culture. I do think you make some very extraordinary films. I think there is a lot of pressure for men and women to make certain types of films. Are there any pressures to perform certain types of masculinities as a filmmaker in Hong Kong?

EF: No. I don't think so. I think maybe it's true in other countries in Asia, like in Korea, or in Japan. But I think in Hong Kong... I always try to describe Hong Kong as a place like a boxing match. As long as you can beat the other person, no matter whether you are a woman or man, it doesn't matter. As long as you can beat the other person in the boxing ring, you are the winner. As simple as that. Nobody cares who you are or where you come from. I think that's Hong Kong.

Autumn Moon, 1992

GM: Let's move on to *Autumn Moon*. Although it is set in Hong Kong, it's a film about migration. It is about an adolescent girl who is getting ready to leave Hong Kong to join her family in Canada. She happens to meet a Japanese tourist whose name is Tokio (Tokyo). It's a good touch. I always remember his name because of that. Tokio is on vacation, taking lots and lots of pictures and video images of Hong Kong. He and the girl meet, and they talk about their different views of what culture is, what food is, and their romances, as two drifting people. I'm wondering if you can tell us how you came up with the idea of looking at the years before the handover and experiences of Hong Kong people before 1997 through the eyes of a Japanese tourist. How and why?

CL: I really can't nail it down to how and why. What I remember very clearly was that during that time, whenever I went to restaurants, I would find young kids playing with their PlayStations. They would be having a big family dinner, and they would just play with their PlayStations, while the adults were talking. There would be no communication. Whenever there is any festivity, like the moon festival (Mid-Autumn Festival), I would find that things have changed, moved on, from paper lanterns to lanterns made of plastic, no more lighting of candles, just have the light bulb inside. I think a lot of things are changing and had changed, and things are no longer what they were before. I find that quite disturbing. I was wondering what would happen to these young kids that grow up in such different ways. Then, Hong Kong has the

Handover (1997). I don't know what's going to happen. Somehow it's that kind of thing that was in my mind when we were trying to work on the script. I don't know how we came up with this Japanese guy.

EF: It's mainly because of financing; the Japanese investors approached us. They wanted us to make a one-hour episode for their video release of a series of detective stories. Six episodes with this main character played by Nagase, solving problems in six Asian countries and one would be set in Hong Kong. But we counter-proposed that we do a feature film.

CL: It would be impossible for six different directors to make a character consistent, this private detective solving problems in different countries. I don't think it will be interesting. We said, "We can do this. We can have Nagase because I'm sure he'd be a great actor; but, we'll just make a different story that has nothing to do with the private detective idea." He would come to Hong Kong, and we'd find something for him to do. It'll be more than 60 minutes. We can use the same amount of money, but we will make it into a feature film, and they will have their home video, or even a longer one. They can make it into one and a half videos. They will also have their feature. So that was the background behind it. But, of course, we have got one great actor and we can just develop our own story.

EF: I think sometimes the financing will change the creative dynamics. The reason why we make films in Hong Kong is because we like films. For both of us, Tarkovsky is our favorite director. Ozu is our favorite director. But how can you make a film like what Tarkovsky did? How do you make a film like Ozu did? There's no market there. Because Hong Kong films are so market-driven and there's no government funding like in the Soviet Union. We just have to stick with the market. We just try to write the script that is appealing to investors, and, at the same time, we have our own input into the film that we'd enjoy. This time, because of this Japanese money, there is no attachment, which means that they allow us to do whatever we want. But, at the same time, all we need to do is to deliver the film within the budget. So, actually this is the first time we have all the creative freedom to do something that we really want to do in our whole life.

CL: It was a bit like doing student film, because what we had was a crew with the members in their first role in a certain position. For example, the cinematographer is someone who was a lighting guy before. He got his chance to be a cinematographer now. The production designer was actually Timmy Yip (Tim Yip), who probably some of you will know, who later on became the production designer for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that won the Oscar. It was his first time being a production designer. Everyone was promoted to do something they love to do, but hadn't had a chance to do. There was a great rapport on set and everyone was trying to put in the best that they could. There was no problem with time. Everyday we could go as long as we wanted to. We only had to work within a certain numbers of days because the equipment we hired is limited to a certain period. It's an external kind of restriction, but, in your spirit, in your heart, you can do what you want. That was the kind of energy we had when we were doing the film.

SF: I'm going to ask the food question. Food is very important in a lot of your films, but in this film, particularly, there is a range of statements made about food. Besides the McDonald scene, Grandma cooking is also very important. When you were thinking about plot and character development, how does food fit in?

CL: In Chinese culture, food is something very important. More importantly, it's an expression of love. If you'd traveled for a long time and you come home, your mom would say, "I'll cook you a great dinner." It's that kind of thing. Food is an association with family warmth, love and comfort. I suppose you know for us, that's what it means. Food from McDonald's is a totally different thing. It represents a totally different thing. Grandma's cooking, for the young girl, is just grandma's cooking; but for the guy, whose whole life is traveling and looking for good food, this is actually real food for him. That's the kind of juxtaposition we are trying to get from McDonald's and grandma's food. Food probably plays different roles in our different films. But, in this case, it was what it's meant to be.

Floating Life, 1996

GM: Maybe we should move on to *Floating Life*? This is your first film set primarily in Australia, but also in Germany and Hong Kong. So you have three specific locations--plus references to a plot of land in the mainland. I'm curious how did you design the production to flow this way and why did you choose Australia? I'm also wondering how you picked Germany as the other point on the compass. How do all the points on the compass fit together for you in the film?

The film is about an extended family. It's very much a diaspora film in that regard. It's not about two locations. It's about several locations that connect a family on three different continents. The film is structured using their homes. The physical locations, the domestic locations are very important. There are battles over the homes --who belongs and who doesn't belong in the home. It also deals with how ethnicity fits into the "home." How are you Chinese in Germany? How are you Chinese in Australia? How are you Chinese in Hong Kong? And, how does that relate to the continuation of your family? How are the family relations the same? Or how do they change as you move from one location to the other? I'm wondering if you could talk about those specific locations and how you deciding on them in particular for this film.

CL: I suppose it's quite a common thing that happens to lots of us Chinese families in Hong Kong. The family members are dispersed all over the world. We wanted to create that landscape and show how one family member could be in the Southern hemisphere, and one member would be in Hong Kong still, and then one member would be in Europe or America. It doesn't really matter. I suppose being in Germany creates a little bit more tension. Because somehow Germany makes you feel a little bit more... people are more hostile and can be kind of militant. You have that kind of feeling. So, we just had to pick one location for... we wanted to make sense of how they were dispersed. That was how we picked the locations.

As you said earlier, the film has this structure with a house in Australia, a house in Hong Kong, a house in Germany. The house is such an important thing in Chinese tradition. For instance, if you're going to get married, your parents say, "Buy a house." Or, if you're going to work, you'd save up money as soon as you can to get a house. In the parents' eyes, if their children each have a house, then they are secure and they are safe. It's all about this Chinese way of planting a root somewhere, so the house and where it is play a very important part.

GM: There is a sequence in *Floating Life* dealing with abortion. This is a very emotional sequence, and I think it is unique. I can think of no other film that has an abortion scene highlighting the reaction of the father. For me, it's a pivotal scene in the film. The film has many comic and tragic moments. This is the moment where there's this meeting of these very different moods. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the sequence.

EF: I think this is the film in which we moved for the first time to another area apart from the Chinese diaspora or the migration theme. We were going into the theme of existence. So that's why after we finished this film, when people were talking about the experience of immigrants, but, then, for us, it's more than that. Actually this is our creative process - part of our creative process is that we move on to another area rather than stay with the... Clara's first film is about immigration already. It's called *The Other Half and the Other Half*. So, with *Floating Life*, we should stop. Ok. That's enough. We can't offer anymore on this theme. This film is a new beginning of a new phase for us.

CL: We began the theme of finding a place in the world, what is meant by existence, what it means for our relationship, our being in the world, with the world, the connection. It is about planting your root in a foreign land and how finally to find the ground that you can really put your foot on and say, "This is the place I really want to stay and this will be my country, my adopted country." But, at the same time, it's more than that, because it is also about how to live, what it means to exist. Existence means your relationship with your relatives, your friends and your ancestors. The only way out for the parents and what the parents were showing to the kids was that you can only be a full person if you have this connection in this horizontal as well as this vertical (direction). It can't be just one. It has to be both. Maybe if you have both, you can find what it means to exist.

From that we tried to move one step further, to explore further the theme of existence, what it is our being with the world, what it meant – basically the questions of "who am I, what am I?" - hence for example the heartache, the anxiety, the fear of Kar Ming when he was faced with the dead foetus - the big hit on the head for him, the realization of his own mortality when he was faced with the death of his own flesh and blood, all interconnected with the collection of his grandfather's bones.

EF: I think, during that period of time, we started to read more of the new Confucianism. Literature, I mean. We were influenced by this philosophy. In a way this is part of it (the film) I can see that. Even though now I don't like the scene, I think it's the influence of that period. For us, it's still quite immature in terms of a film. But it's part of the process.

GM: Why don't you like the scene?

EF: Part of the reason is that the actor is not Chinese-speaking. We have that restriction, because we made this film in Australia. Because of the funding, we can only use Australian actors. But, there are not that many experienced Chinese-speaking actors or ethnic Chinese actors in Australia. We had limited choices. It's strange in the film with that family, we have to ask the non Chinese-speaking actors to speak Chinese, and ask the not-really-good-English-speaking Chinese to speak English. It's totally chaotic. It was hard for Clara to direct. So, because of that, we can think of ways to improve this scene just by watching it.

CL: I think from watching it just then. I found out I don't feel happy with it because it was too obvious. It was trying to say too much. That was what we've been trying to do: as we move to the new phase, we are trying to hold back a bit more and let it show itself rather than pushing it to the audience. That's what we are trying to do. That has been a new thing. We can talk about it later. I think it's still Eddie's kind of dialogue, but I think it could be better.

EF: I can rewrite it.

NT: How much of this film is autobiographical? Or based on biographical incidents of your two families' immigration?

CL: I think this is more about the feeling; the emotion is authentic. There was no actual autobiographical thing in it. But, of course, my family too has been dispersed all over the world. I have a sister in Germany, a brother that lives in Hong Kong, while we moved to Australia. But, other than that, there's nothing. Let's take the abortion scene. I wouldn't think my brother would do that. I don't know. If that happens, I bet he wouldn't tell me.

EF: There is one scene which is autobiographical.

CL: The only one. This is when my little brother was trying to take a sneak peak at a next door neighbor --a girl. That was the only thing.

EF: No. There is another one. Grandpa's bones.

CL: Yes, the bones. In Hong Kong, when your relative has been buried for over seven years, because a coffin takes up too much space, you have to collect the bones and put them in a container and then put it in the cemetery. I've had that experience. So, that was in the film. But, other than that, what I think is more true is the fact that a lot of Chinese families, or even non-Chinese families, have this experience of trying to find your roots and your own place in a foreign land. When we showed this film in different festivals, people, who could be Scottish or African, not necessarily Chinese people, would come to me and say "this is exactly what happened in my family." That was actually what the response was.

Since we worked on *Farewell China*, we did a lot of research on what it's like for Chinese to live in a foreign place. Like my own experience, a student in London for a few years and then working in New York, and living in Australia. With all of these accumulations of experiences and stories we have heard, we were trying to seek and find the truth, or what we feel was the truth at that time, to make up the story.

Chapter 2: Themes of Existence And Dream

Like a Dream, 2009

EF: One common phenomenon in both *Farewell China* and *Floating Life* is that the women characters in these films all have psychological problems. That's true because that's the result of our research. When we were in New York, some social workers told us about this.

CL: Actually, when we were working at Apple TV, I did this magazine program, and I did a lot of research on how Chinese families live in New York. I heard about lots of success stories, but I also heard lots of stories about women having psychological or mental problems. It's probably because they don't have to work. They stay home and they become very lonely. As their children grow up and start speaking English to them, they feel very rejected and abandoned, and lots of them developed mental problems. A lot of women committed suicide. There are lots of stories that we've heard about. I didn't make a connection with these women in our films until now.

GM: Yes, this is in *Like a Dream* too, but this time it's a man. It's the male character who has the issue, although the women also have psychological problems. In *Like a Dream*, there are a lot of issues involving the nature of existence as well: What is fiction? What is reality? What is in your imagination? What is out in the real world? This is your most recent film which you brought to the HKIFF this year. It deals with the dream life of a male character, Max, played by Daniel Wu, who becomes obsessed with a dream woman that he conjures up in his imagination. He then goes to Shanghai and gets a brief glimpse of her. He then goes to Hangzhou and gets another glimpse of a concrete woman, who is played by the same actress. So these are dual roles: one of a dream girl who may or may not exist in Shanghai and the Hangzhou girl who helps Max to look for her while she searches for her own doppelganger through his imagination.

When I was watching this film, I was really struck by its being in conversation with Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Talking about the question of existence: what do you see, what can you see and what does the film show you. I thought of *Vertigo*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, *Blow Up*. But, then I was talking with someone else who said, "No. You're completely wrong, Gina. It's really a Chinese story. It's the young scholar dreaming of his dream girl and then somehow finding themselves together even though one has died." Then, I thought maybe it's like Teresa Tang's song *Tian Mi Mi's* lyric, "In a

dream I see you. You are the one in my dream.” I was curious if you’d talk a little bit about some of your inspiration for the film and whether any of these make any sense to you. Or, you may have had a completely different inspiration for your visualization of this dream world.

New creative phase, Goddess of 1967, 2000

EF: I think this is the beginning of a new phase of our creative life. After 2001, after the making of the film, *Goddess of 1967*, we were so unsatisfied with what we had been doing. I mean, creatively.

CL: I think we were dissatisfied because we think that the process we used to work, our creativity before, was limiting us. We wanted to be free. We wanted to find more possibilities.

EF: The way we used to work is, for example, in *Goddess*, Clara would say, “I want to explore the dark side of human beings.” From then onward, we started to brainstorm about the stories, the characters, and the lines. How can we express ourselves effectively, or what more can we do concerning this theme? We were going back and forth throughout the writing process. We tried to analyze almost everything. After *Goddess*, we asked ourselves whether this is the best we can do. At that time, we found two really good mentors. One is a painter working in Paris, and another one is a philosophy lecturer in Hong Kong. For almost twenty years, we have been good friends, and we have been influenced by these two people. When we try to find a new way to create our films, we fall back on the way our painter friend has been working. Actually, what he is trying to do is to develop a new aesthetic of painting. What he is trying to say is, “Go back to the essence of art. What is this all about?” From his point of view, we can see how he works with paintings, though we are working in a different medium. It’s film. What we’ve learned is that we should throw away everything that we’ve learned. We just have to throw away all the techniques, all the skills, all the ideas, almost everything, and, then, just let our intuition lead us into the film.

CL: In a way, we moved away from our comfort zone. We’ve tried something experimental and totally new. What we felt at that time was that we had come to the point that we are confident, even if we don’t put in there what we really want to say. It’s actually in us. The way we look at the world, our philosophy in life, what we think, what we feel, what we worry about. Anything that has gone through us will come out even without us trying to say what we really want to say. In a way, we say this is intuition, but intuition that probably includes the whole of us. What we actually feel is that this is a more holistic approach, that we are not compartmentalizing ourselves. It’s more complex, and there is more possibility, and there is more freedom. It’d lead us to something that is limitless. There is no boundary anymore. Anything can happen in whatever we want to say or in whatever stories that we want to create. Actually, it doesn’t matter, because what we think, what we experience and what we want to say will be in it. Instead of trying too hard to say something, we actually hold back. We’re going the other way to hold ourselves back. What we want is to exist in the character

itself. We'll come up with something or somebody that will lead us, and, because we try to exist with him, we come into our working room like a blank piece of paper. We come in with a fresh mind, and we look at what we have done before and exist in "now" with him. This subject or object would become one with us. We feel more possibilities. I don't really know how to describe it, but this is what we feel to be the right direction.

Global dream: Like a Dream

NT: I think this is Zhuang-zi's idea on reality and the dream.

EF: Just that, Clara mentioned the keyword: There is no object and subject. Just one.

GM: This is the famous story of philosopher [Zhuang-zi](#). He dreamt of being a butterfly, or perhaps a butterfly dreamt of him.

The city scenes are striking in all your films, as well as the landscape in your Australian works particularly. In this case, the cityscape moving between the actual location and the dream location is breathtaking. Could you talk a little bit about that? Also, how does Taipei fit in as a dream city for you?

CL: I suppose one of my qualities is that I am a totally directionless person. But, images stay in my mind. I could pass by my own house, and I don't know that I've reached home. If I look at the place, I'd say, "I've been here." Colors, structures, architecture, landscape, shadows and lights... All of these are very important to me and they are part of me. Whenever I approach a script, this would be the first thing in my mind when determining how to create and how to bring out the story. A lot of times we want to hold back, we want the visual to say what is not said --and the sound, too. I believe cinema is a journey of sound and images. Normally, when I start a film, I'll try to find references to give to the cameraman and the production designer and tell them what I want to do this time. Those references will point a way to what the film will look like. I suppose the landscape and cityscape are important because they point out our relation with the world: how we exist and the way we exist. The cityscape in this film, as in my other films I suppose, said a lot about the desolation of men in the big metropolis, and Max's relation with it, same as in how a landscape can define a human existence.

I also believe that you can create poetry in film. The more you can use the images to tell a story, the more you can use sound to tell a story, the more the public can be able to perceive it. There's always a third element that'd come out whenever we try to do this: something that you probably would not have imagined before, but, somehow, it would be there and exist. There'd be a pleasant surprise.

EF: I think from *Autumn Moon* onward, we don't want to do simply a naturalistic film even though you can't be without figures, landscapes, characters. But, still, we don't

want to be just that. Even the landscape that Clara has described, sometimes it's more like an inner landscape rather than external landscape.

CL: I suppose that is one of the things that I like: you know when something is a little bit more abstract, it tells you something more about the thing that is hidden. A lot of times, there is so much mystery in the world, in our existence. When you are able to experiment with this, you are actually allowing the audience to discover more. Instead of saying, "You should see this!" I suggest, "Maybe this is what you see." It's more a suggestion than saying "I want you to see this as it is." But I want you to see behind it what it is.

Endnotes

ⁱ Special thanks to Fanny Chan for transcribing this discussion and to Lin Yiping and Derek Lam for their help with this project.

ⁱⁱ *Apple Daily* is a Hong Kong tabloid newspaper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cantonese slang for foreigners.