

# Features

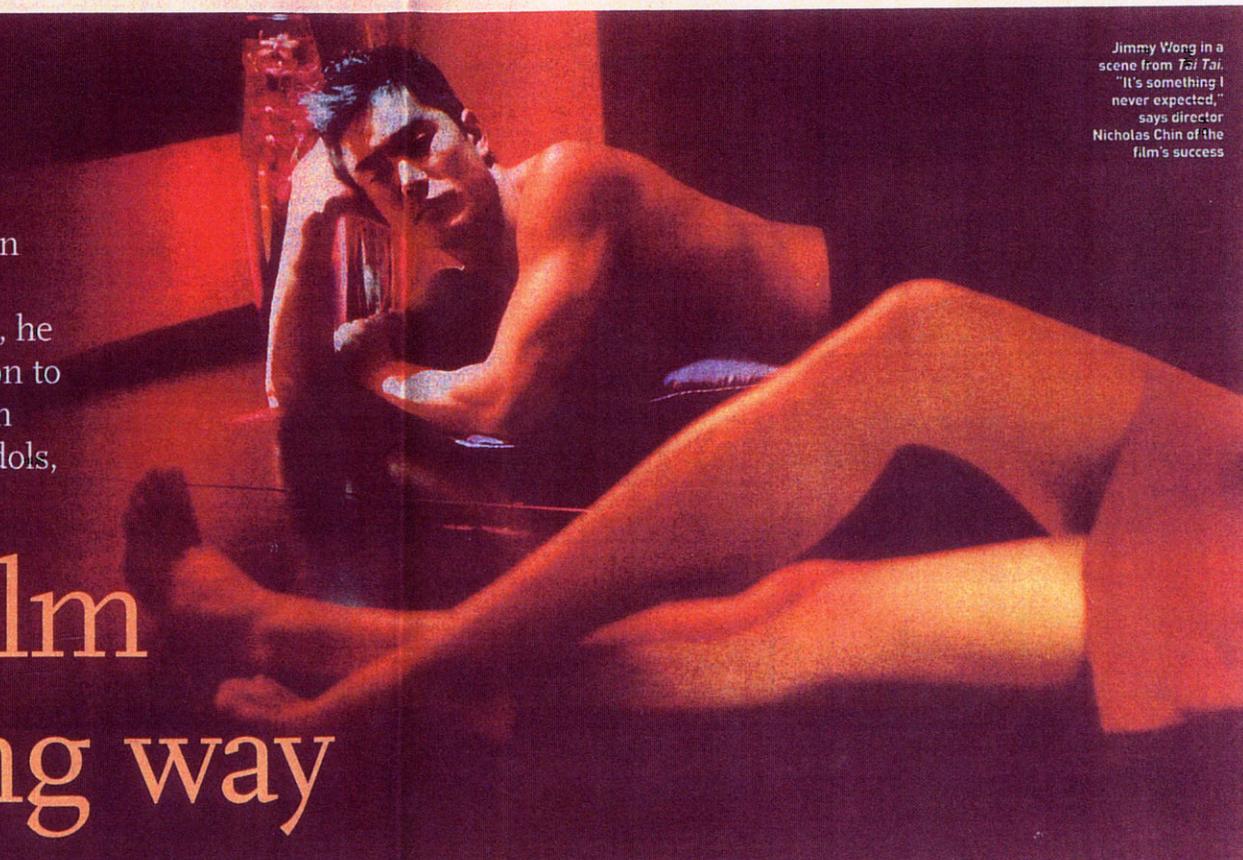
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SCULPTOR USES THE  
LIGHT FANTASTIC PAGE 4

Tomorrow Janet Yang, bridging China and Hollywood

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A short film  
goes a long way



Jimmy Wong in a scene from *Tai Tai*. "It's something I never expected," says director Nicholas Chin of the film's success

**NICHOLAS CHIN** will this weekend take a giant leap out of obscurity and into the limelight at the 55th Cannes Film Festival where he'll share centre stage with some of the world's top directors. The young film-maker's first movie, the 14-minute, Hong Kong-made *Tai Tai*, has been honoured with official selection in the short-film category for Cannes 2002. It will have its world premiere tomorrow, before the awards are announced on Sunday.

But before that, the butterflies will be stirring in Chin's stomach when he gets to meet some of his idols over dinner – and they include Martin Scorsese, the legendary American director, and Abbas Kiarostami, who holds a similar standing in his native Iran. Both men are sitting on the short-film jury this year (Scorsese as president), along with French actress Judith Godrèche, American actress Tilda Swinton and German director Jan Schutte. Chin will dine with them all before the final decision is made.



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Sitting over coffee in a Cannes hotel earlier this week, 28-year-old Chin is understandably overwhelmed. His feet, he says, have hardly touched the ground since he learned less than a month ago that his film would be in competition. The fact he is still not far removed from your average film-going fan is highlighted when we first meet on the street – he says he needs five minutes to rush off and haggle for extra film tickets just like countless other hopefuls who make the annual pilgrimage to the French seaside resort.

"It's really insane," Chin says. "It's something I never expected. I had finished editing the film at Christmas and there's generally a week when you finish editing that you think you're hot, you think it's the best thing. So that's when I sent it off to all the festivals. Then you forget about it and then the rejection letters start coming in."

Cannes receives more than 3,000 submissions annually for the short-film awards and from those they pluck the final field of 11. After Chin submitted his film, he sat back and waited – and then

came a bolt from the blue. "Someone called me at about 4am in New York and I thought it was a hoax call," Chin says. "Since then it has just been one mad rush to transfer the print from digital video to 35mm, which is one of the requirements for screening at this festival. Short films are not generally on 35mm as they are made more to be used as a calling-card than to make any money."

*Tai Tai*, which stars Josie Ho, Jimmy Wong, Conroy Chan and Idy Law, gives a brief account of the life of Clara, who is forced to take another look at her tai tai lifestyle when she discovers her husband is having an affair. The film was shot in some of Hong Kong's favourite tai tai haunts – the China Club and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. For North London-raised Chin, it is a story founded in the tales he heard around his grandparents' dinner table. "I've always been fascinated by tai tais," says Chin. "Growing up looking at Hong Kong and Chinese society pages I was just look-

ing at a whole different world. Then when I came to Hong Kong in the 1990s, I met some tai tais and I thought they were all charming; they would come to dinner and then disappear. So that was really the start of things.

"The other thing was growing up with Shanghainese grandparents. I heard all these stories from the 1950s and 60s, so when I came to Asia I could imagine what their lives must have been like. It's not an expose of tai tais, but more their world in my imagination. It's very stylised and the story comes from gossip."

After studying art history at Cambridge University, Chin drifted around various jobs before coming to Hong Kong in 1995. Two years later, he was back in Britain, working for the BBC's documentary section. After moving to New York to work for PBS, he decided in 2000 it was time to branch out on his own. A "born escapist", Chin had grown up making the most of London's many and varied cinemas. He had helped video-artist Laura Waddington but had always wanted to create his own narrative. Then, with the increased interest at Cannes in Asian

film-makers such as Wong Kar-wai, Edward Yang and Hsu Hsiao-ming, he says he knew it was time to make his move. "The advent of digital video meant there weren't really any excuses not to be doing my own thing any more," says Chin. "I was really inspired by those film-makers and their success. Obsessed with them, in fact. And I felt that I had used up all my excuses."

What happened next is a classic lesson in resourcefulness. Chin returned to Hong Kong last May, script in hand, and began making connections. He would go out, talk to people and collect name cards.

"Basically I was working on two degrees of separation," he says. "I would meet someone who knew someone and so on. So then a friend of mine, Tansy Lau, knew Josie and showed her the script. Josie liked it and it all started from there."

Chin then linked up with Ken Lau and Mark Young at Deanse Film. Joining the production was Hong Kong-based cinematographer Charlie Lam who had just won the 2001 Kodak Vision Award in Hong Kong. "Charlie won the Kodak Award, Josie was nominated for best supporting actress at the Hong Kong Film Awards for her part in *Forever And Ever* and now there's this," says Chin. "So we've all been on a bit of a roll."

For Ho, also in Cannes with Chin and Chan, *Tai Tai* presented an opportunity to do something different, the lead character of Clara providing a brief excursion into a more dramatic role. "I've always been worried that I would be doing comedy for the rest of my life," she says. "When I heard [that *Tai Tai* was in competition] I just screamed and jumped up and down in my room. I have always wanted more dramatic roles, so hopefully this will open some doors for me."

The past few weeks have been a similarly wild ride for model-turned-actor Chan, most recently seen in Hong Kong in director Billy Chung's *Angel Face, Devil Heart*. "I almost fainted when I heard the news," he says. "But I'm quite proud. And it's good because the whole team were just trying to put together something nice for Hong Kong and it really worked. And now I'm thinking, 'I'm in Europe for the first time and I'm in Cannes!' It's crazy."

It will be a nervous 48 hours for the entire team, as they wait on the decision of Scorsese and his colleagues. But, Chin says, they are all determined to make the most of whatever comes their way. "It's been pretty overwhelming," he says. "But it's great being able to meet the people and to get the building blocks to my career started. Being a short film, this really belongs at film festivals. So now it's a point of making that next step towards something more substantial."

matheu.scott@scmp.com

## A SHORT FILM GOES A LONG WAY

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