





# TAI TAI

## 太太

BY LI XI

"Tai Tai" is a 20-minute short film about the glamour and decadence of Hong Kong high society. Young director Nicolas Chin finished shooting this jewel in two consecutive days in the sultry heat of a Hong Kong summer. With generous support from Fendi, Loewe, Christian Dior and Berny Cheng, whose exquisite gowns make several cameos, and from Starz People model agency and the silver screen ingenue Josie Ho making for a stellar cast, one can easily guess why it has already been cheekily deemed "an abridged version of 'In the Mood for Love'". One night, Nic and Josie, sitting at a Park Lane hotel over cocktails stroke on speculation of the meaning of 'tai tai' behind all these frocks and big houses.

### THE ATTRACTION

NIC: "Tai tai" is the Hong Kong term for the high society housewife married to rich husbands. What attracts me to them is obviously their high style and the hidden emotions - the underlying secrets of a married couple which have never been confronted. There is this intense silence of their private lives in contrast to the ostentatious glamour of their social lives.

JOSIE: When I go out shopping in HK's Central district, I see some of these 'tai tais'. I really found them mysterious under their polished facade and when I go to balls and galas, I observe them as well. Since I was young, I was associated with this particular lifestyle, but I didn't know what they were about. But when I grew up, I got the feeling that I didn't want to be one. In a lot of ways, they are dependent on their husbands, there is a lot of quiet pain inside, and I can't deal with anything "quiet". I like to be in control. Being a 'tai tai', I guess you can't do that. But as an actress, I don't mind trying to be one, to experience that mysterious persona.

### THE FAMILY ASSOCIATION

NIC: I grew up in a Shanghaiese family in London. Since I was a kid, I've heard a lot about 1930s lifestyle, especially about the beautiful and rich women. When I came to Hong Kong as a kid, I was introduced to the lives of 'tai tais'. There are similarities between Shanghai in the 20s and 30s and Hong Kong in the 80s and 90s, very affluent and hedonistic. And when I met them at banquets at those grand mansions, I always wondered what happened to them after they went home. Since they looked so charming - but you could discern there was something else going on. It's intriguing, especially in Hong Kong. When you say one thing, it always means something else.

JOSIE: Yes, growing up in a family like that, 'tai tai' was the ultimate dream, your job was to be glamorous and beautiful. Before I read the script, I was treacherous, and against the notion of 'tai tai'. Maybe I was only looking at the surface, and I hate them being so fake. Until I met you, you taught me maybe there is another layer underneath their pretense. Because they are so suppressed, so that adds a depth to them. So after I did this film, I have more understanding and sympathy, although I still don't want to be a 'tai tai'.

### DOUBLE LIFE

JOSIE: Being an actress and "socialite", I do give people the impression that I am leading a glamorous life, but I am also a struggling artist, in the sense that I am struggling against Hong Kong people's general expectation to only see things in their glossy and positive versions. If I want to be myself, say what I want to say and do what I want to do, that's destructive to my career. I do feel the pressure of leading a double life.

NIC: Living in New York now is very different. I am there to pursue my career. My family lives in London, and that's another reality. I have to face family expectations. It took me a while to finally get into film because I was distracted by things my family expected me to do or to be. So it's like you have this secret and everyone knows, but no one is going to spell it out... it's the same dynamic as a 'tai tai'.



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