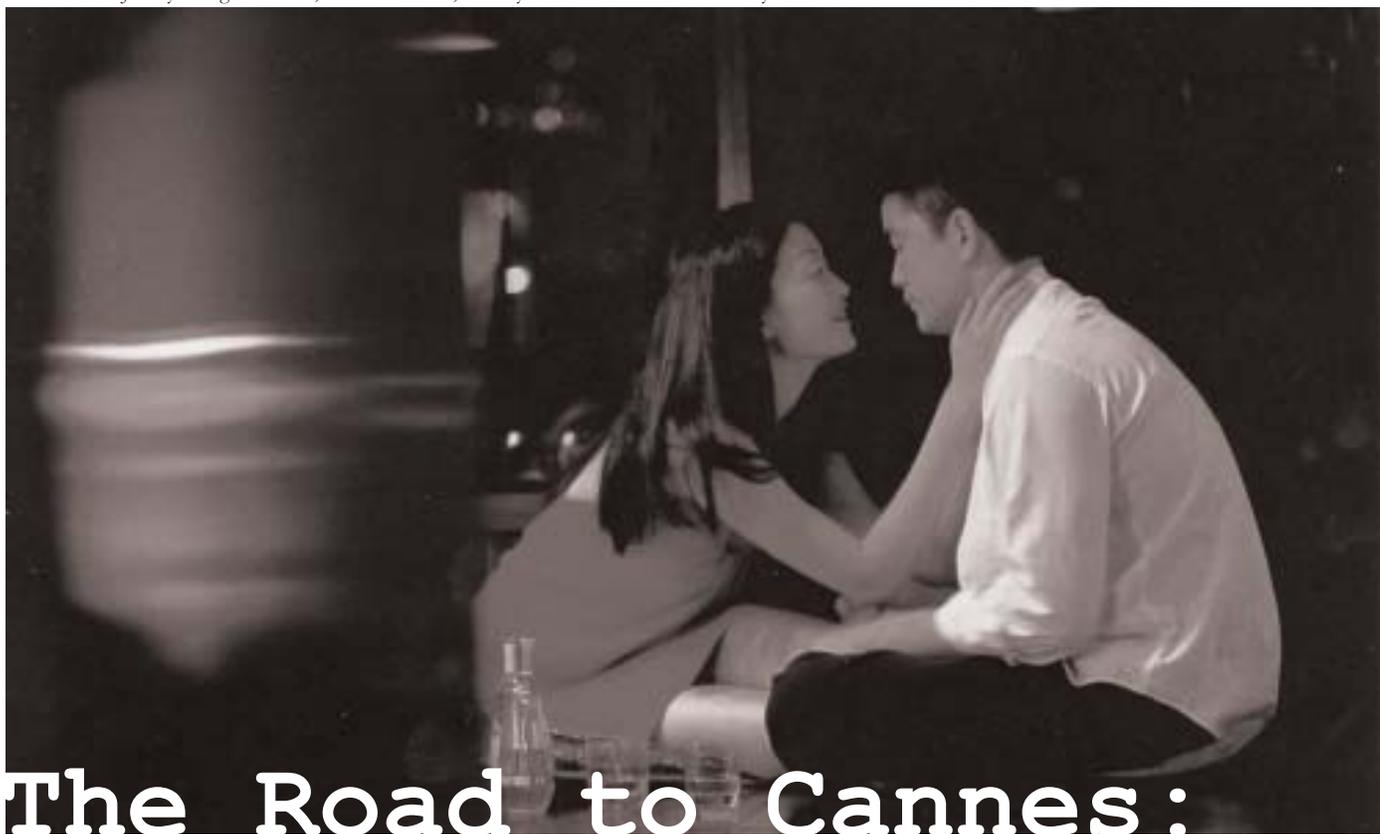


From *Tai Tai*: Jimmy Wong as Harold, Clara's husband, and Idy Law as his mistress. Courtesy of Tai Tai Productions.



# The Road to Cannes:

A Look Inside the Lens of Nicholas Chin



From *Tai Tai*: Josie Ho as Clara. Courtesy of Tai Tai Productions.

Nicholas Chin is the director of *Tai Tai*, a short film from Hong Kong that was an official selection at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. *Tai Tai* is a stylized look inside the lives of the film's namesake, the Cantonese word for women whose husbands are filthy rich businessmen, leading them to live mysterious lives amongst themselves. The film captures the women's socialite – and solitary – lives through a short but vivid glimpse through the eyes of one tai tai in particular, Clara, played by Hong Kong actress Josie Ho. Mr. Chin grew up in London and is now based in New York, living a life similar to many an aspiring filmmaker. Except, of course, he and his film got to mingle in the south of France with people like Martin Scorsese.

**Did you always know you wanted to do film?**

Not at all. I graduated in art history. I did a bit of law, a lot of waiting, just not knowing what I really wanted to do at all. But I'd always seen a lot of films as a kid. It was sort of cool. I just never thought myself that I would do it. In no way did I know that I wanted to do film; I didn't go to film school, I don't have anybody in my family who can film or anything like that. Just doing other things you don't want to do get you to doing something.

**So how and when did you get into the film industry? When did you decide you wanted to do film?**

I graduated and did a whole load of other things. Three or four years after college I got a job as a P.A. (production assistant) at the BBC in London, in

documentaries; pretty much making coffee and then doing research. Then I came over to New York and did the same, working with documentaries with PBS here. And then digital video (DV) came, and I sort of realized that with digital video you could pretty much do your own thing. It was sort of crazy. I tried to put a reel together, did some stuff here, and got freelance work editing. I went back to Hong Kong, and DV had just started out there, and did some commercials. And with that I started doing *Tai Tai*.

**What about film has inspired you?**

The year 2000, which was when Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* came out, and Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love*, two directors who I think are geniuses, and I think just watching their stuff inspired me just to do something. And I've always liked Hong Kong cinema. Making films out in Hong Kong has certain advantages. It's a small world; it's small so everybody knows everybody else. The people who I work with are my friends.

**Are you a writer turned director, or a director turned writer?**

I don't like writing. But I'm stubborn enough to know that I think it helps if you write and are able to direct your own material. I prefer that at the moment than directing someone else's material. You can set it out in the writing, you can work it through on paper rather than working it through in production, which can cost a lot of money. Starting out, you won't really get a break unless you've got a good script. If you've got a script and you're attached to it, it's easier. It's all pretty much the same thing; the

writing and directing seem to be the same kind of job.

**Are you constantly coming up with story ideas and writing scripts?**

I try and keep two on the go. It's difficult to stick with one project for a long time because it gets old and stale. So you jump on one idea and come back to it.

**What was your inspiration behind *Tai Tai*?**

I'd always been fascinated by tai tai's out in Hong Kong, and I'd meet them and have dinner with them and they'd disappear. I wanted to find out what happened behind closed doors. The short film is sort of a stylized world of taitai's in my imagination, rather than a gritty reality of what they're really like. The tai tais of my imagination rather than anything based in reality.

To start a career you need to make short film before you can get to the next stage. For me, during it, I wanted to shoot a narrative drama and I wanted to see whether I could do it, as a challenge to myself. Career wise, it's something that everybody that has to do.

**How much time in total did you spend on *Tai Tai*?**

A year and a half, two years. It was half a year writing a script, half a year getting people to work for very little money.

It took me about half a year to a year to actually get the script together. I would say most of the time was spent paralyzed with fear. I finally just got up and left and went to Hong Kong with a

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sort of complete script. Then I went to Hong Kong, and was there for two to three months in pre-production, just trying to get a crew together, finding the people and locations. I didn't know that many people at all. Then it was just making phone calls to somebody who knows somebody who I knew.

I was lucky getting Josie Ho to get in it, which helped a lot. A lot of it is two degrees of separation; I knew somebody who knew her and it just went from there. I also had a really talented cameraman called Charlie Young. It's just getting to meet these people and spending a lot of time with them.

We wanted to shoot for seven days but only had money for four. So we shot for four days.

Then I came back to New York right around September 11. It was shot on film (super 16), so I transferred it onto digital video so I could edit it online on my Apple Mac. So I spent four months sitting at home editing it and sent it out around Christmas time. I got the news from Cannes around January. And then it was nuts because they wanted a 35mm film print. It was a month of craziness. I had to go to Europe. So I went to Zurich when we did the transfer and the cutting and the color correction and the subtitling. It was a mad rush and then it was the festival.

#### How did you get selected for Cannes?

I finished editing, you go to the website, you fill out the form, you put the video in and you send it off. And

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And to be perfectly honest, a lot of it's got to be your money or money borrowed from your parents. It's a dirty little secret.

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you forget about it. They got back to me four months later. There's a huge amount of pot luck. It was sort of amazing. I got a phone call at three in the morning. They needed it on 35mm and I'd never thought of putting it back on 35mm. After that, it was a question of getting it on film in time. It was just a huge mad rush of trying to get it in time.

#### What was being at Cannes like?

It was great. It was a bit like a circus. It was great just in terms of getting to meet people. You're always not sure whether or not your doing the right thing. Getting it helps one's confidence. It helps one realize that one's perhaps on the right path. I was lucky. The actors and actresses and cinematographers all came to Cannes at the same time. It was like a two-week holiday with each other. It's fun with a group of friends going to something like that.

The Hong Kong film industry has a presence at Cannes. They hire out a beach and have a huge party. I was able to go meet Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung. It was nice. They sort of invited us in to their little world. It was a good way for me to meet people you wouldn't really meet.

#### A big issue with going into the film industry is always money. Usually, there's not enough to go around. Any suggestions on how to raise money, how to find a crew, and actors, when you're not yet established?

Here in the States there's a lot of grants. If you contact NAATA (National Asian American Telecommunications Association), they're a great resource. There's also something called VC (Visual Communications). It's in L.A.; they have the Asian American Film Festival. They have money. They grant stuff.

And to be perfectly honest, a lot of it's got to be your money or money borrowed from your parents. It's a dirty little secret.

If you're expecting to make money from a short film, it's the wrong idea. I believe they're calling cards; it's just for oneself to see whether one can direct or not. Take *Tai Tai*. For all it's success,

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There are no more excuses. With digital video and your Apple at home you can pretty much do everything to a high quality.

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it's not been great money. Neither is it a guarantee at all. 90% of scripts don't make it to production.

#### What would you an aspiring filmmaker to do in order to get to Cannes, or to reach any kind of level of success in the film industry?

Start out doing production work. You got to make coffee for two years. I think it's important that you just get to see how the process works from beginning to end. Somebody else asked me that recently; it's just the one thing you have to do in the beginning.

And the usual stuff: see a lot of films. With digital video, there are no more excuses. Beforehand, you could legitimately bitch and complain that it's too expensive, that you have to spend years apprenticing. With digital video and your Apple at home you can pretty much do everything to a high quality.

#### And finally, what's the best way to get started? Is it better to make a short film and have that calling card, or should you just dive into the industry and be a P.A.?

I think you have to do both. You definitely have to P.A. I don't think there's anyway you can get around that.

It's weird. I'm still early in my career. It's not like I've had a great big long career. And the film went way beyond what we thought it was. But if you want to be a director, you need a reel. No one's going to give u a project unless you have a reel.