

# Shopping Paradigms

First-time feature director Wee Li Lin shares her ambivalent notions of shopping.

By Danny Chan

"Walking through the heart of Singapore, is like walking through a series of large shopping centers."

— UK Sociologist  
Mike Featherstone in his book  
*Lifestyles and Consumer Culture*.

The phrase 'shop till you drop' takes on an existential meaning, in the metaphorical sense, when you consider a country as densely populated with shopping malls as Singapore is. Is there life beyond shopping in Singapore? You could almost hear director Wee Li Lin musing aloud, how Singaporeans seemed to be stalked by the unrelenting presence of the retail monster, which entraps and enslaves its unknowing captives. Such is the satirical premise; streaked by underlying defiance, foreboding Wee's maiden feature film *Gone Shopping*.

*Gone Shopping* is a darkly humorous film about three individuals who go to shopping centers with different objectives: Clara (played by renowned emcee-cum-actress Kym Ng), a tragically romantic 40-year-old 'tai tai' a.k.a. wealthy lady of leisure, is there in search of affection; as Renu (Sonya Nair), a feisty 8-year-old girl, looks for her independence; while Aaron (Aaron Kao), a 'Gen-Y' boy, 'shops' for his manhood.

## Retail conundrum

Three years in the making, *Gone Shopping* was birthed almost out of boredom. 'Unemployed' for a few months, the freelance director found herself and her activities invariably situated within or close to a shopping center. This stirred the restless writer in Wee, who began to chronicle her observations of people and things that she saw in the malls – she revealed such sketchy jottings as her method of culling inspiration for her films.

Reflecting on her life, Wee realized that she too had spent a great deal of time

in these air-conditioned, high-ceilinged malls that not only occupied the bulk of her childhood memories, but to her mind, had become an insidious rite of passage for many others in her country. She laments: "Somehow, all arrows seem to be pointing to a shopping centre."

In the wake of the local media's incessant coverage on the mammoth-scale national project for an Integrated Resort (IR) – promising yet more multi-storey shopping complexes – I had presumed Wee's film to be a deftly innocuous but stirring commentary on the project's surrounding brouhaha. Amused at the suggested link, Wee prefers to let the audience do the thinking. Asked whether the film has any political undertones, and the perky director chirps: "I'll leave it to the viewers to uncover but 'yes' definitely."

She shares her bemused concept of shopping centers and the act of shopping: "When I was writing the script, there's a part of me that has a bittersweet relationship with shopping. I hate it because there is nothing else to do and nowhere else to go except the malls. To spend your whole life in a shopping

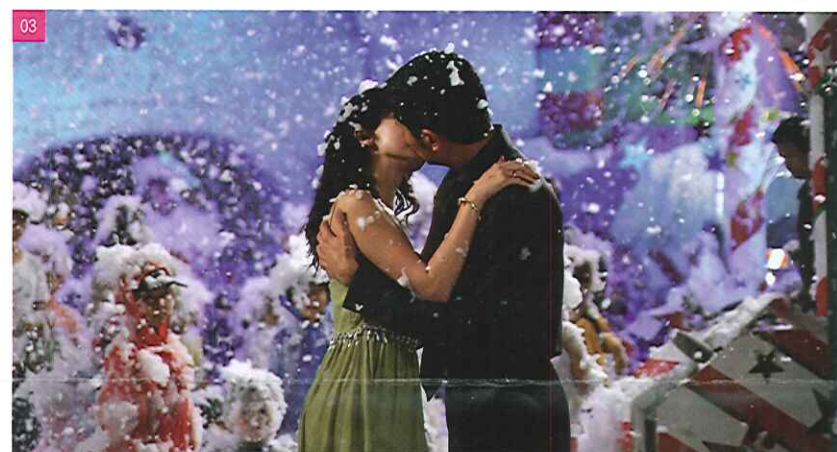
center is really bad. There's so much more to the world but in Singapore, for every corner we turn, it's almost like we're being forced into a shopping center."

"At the same time, I love shopping and the thrill of going to my favorite shops and buying something new or simply looking for them."

Researching for her script, Wee dived

into books and movies on the subject. Her DVD shopping list included such titles as *Scenes from a Mall* (Paul Mazursky), *Going Shopping* (Henry Jaglom), *Mallrats* (Kevin Smith), *Window Shopping* (Chantal Akerman) and *The Shoppaholics* (Wai Ka-Fai).

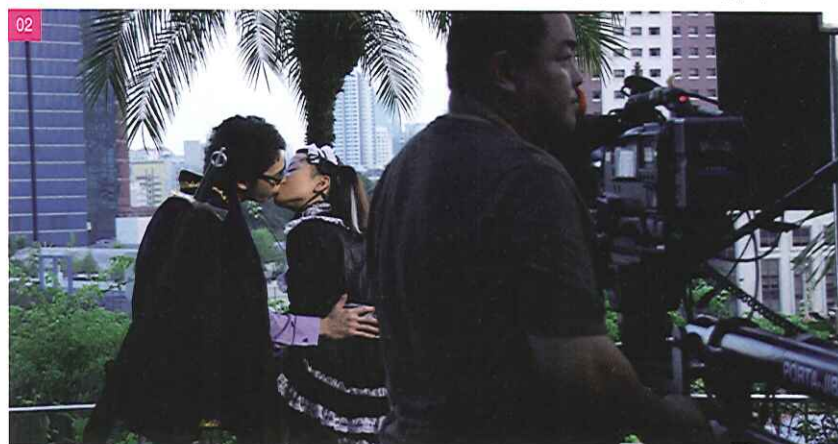
Wee's literary picks – ranging from academic to art and fiction books – goes



03-05: Stills from *Gone Shopping*



01-02: Wee Li Lin (01) and Jackie Ong (02) on set





like the reading list of a final-year student researching for her thesis: Life is not complete without *Shopping* (Chua Beng Huat), *A Theory of Shopping* (Daniel Miller et al), *Shopping, a Century of Art and Consumer Culture* (Hatje Cantz), among others.

"The books deconstructed, fictionalized and visualized shopping, shoppers and shopping centers with such insight and wit, it proved to be invaluable to me as a writer."

When she encountered difficulties in her writing, Wee would refer to another book, *Screenwriting Updated* by Linda Aronson. Wee was so inspired



06-07: Sonya Nair's portrayal of a girl seeking independence



08-09: Aaron Kao plays a 'Gen-Y' boy 'shopping' for his manhood

by the script-writing guidebook that she wrote to its award-winning author, and eventually roped her in as script consultant on the movie.

## Stop-start production

For Wee, helming the S\$600,000 production had been a struggle right from the beginning. For starters, the script she had submitted for review by the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) for funding support, was rejected. The prolific short filmmaker, with almost 10 shorts under her belt, confides: "That was disappointing because they had been very supportive of my short films. They basically said that the movie was neither commercial nor art house; and that the characters were not so recognizable."

Despite the fact that her short films have won awards both at home (Singapore International Film Festival) and overseas (American Film Festivals), the decision made by the local film authorities sent Wee's dreams of a feature film crashing overnight, making her feel like a "complete unknown" all over again.

Recalling her moment of desperation, the graduate of Brown University says, "As a first-time feature filmmaker, with no previous track record, investors find you risky and I really needed their support then."

Wee and her film producer, Fuzzy Abideen started meeting with actors in 2005 and had originally planned to shoot in the third quarter of 2006, but funding and production woes had postponed principal photography to November 2006. Wee and Abideen, who are co-investors in the film, eventually found a private investor, crossing one of many hurdles in the stop-start production.

Due to talent, location and crew availability, the 24-day shoot had to be spread over four months. Conversely, Wee found the schedule less hectic. She admits:

"This was not a bad thing for me as a first time director it gave me some breathing space, more preparation time, more rehearsal time and the luxury to keep improving the script."

## Loose filming schedule, tight rehearsals

The self-confessed compulsive-obsessive director held extensive rehearsal sessions at her own home, to make sure the shoots went like clockwork. In the end, about 90 per cent of the scenes – including all dialogue scenes – had to be rehearsed.

"I believe in rehearsals because on the set, it was do or die. I don't like too many unknown things to happen on set."

That is not to say that Wee was a

stickler when it came to the script. She allowed the actors to improvise with their lines, but these were strictly limited to the rehearsals. She reveals that Adrian Pang, one of Singapore's busiest and sought after actors, who plays a cameo role in *Gone Shopping*, had contributed some lines to the script.

"They were so funny and straight away, we locked them into the script."

Wee is all praise for her actors, particularly Ng and Pang, whom she thought gave beyond their call of duty.

"They (Ng and Pang) didn't have to take part in every rehearsal because, technically it wasn't in their contract. I know they did it because they also cared for the project."

While shooting on HD may have its share of bugbears, Wee gratefully leaves the technical issues in the capable hands of her DP, Jackie Ong – on whom she constantly laps praises as well.

"He was very dedicated. When your DP is prepared and capable, and knows the pitfalls of HD, those things can be largely avoided."

Wee owes her decision to shoot on HD to other Singapore films using that format. She cites Eric Khoo's *Be With Me* and Graham Streeter's *Cages*, as films that translated well visually on the big screens, as her impetus to go HD. Incidentally, both films were shot on Panasonic Varicam AJ-HDC27F and later transferred to 35mm.

It also helped that Ong had his own Varicam and was proficient in it. This meant that any issues with the camera were quickly ironed out on the set.

"I like to fix things on the set, and Jackie is the same way. However, there were issues that we could not resolve there and then, like the strong fluorescent lighting in the shopping centers that produced a greenish cast; it had to be fixed by grading in telecine."

According to Wee, Ong used a 35mm Carl Zeiss prime lens and PS technique

mount on the camera to produce a shallower depth of field.

## Location woes

The biggest challenge for them was shooting in the actual locations in the shopping centers. Ninety per cent of the shots were filmed on location in three local shopping centers; namely Mustafa, Marina Square and Tangs. Even though most of the shots were interiors, the duo had to work around the restrictions of the location sets, as opposed to prop sets that allow greater flexibility. Wee quips:

"Having to adjust to the locations proved to be a fun challenge by itself. Also less work for the art director."

Shooting in shopping centers was a bigger headache than Wee had previously envisioned.

"Many of the obstacles were associated with locations – not that the location managers did a bad job – but rather some locations pulling out at the last minute and some giving us the green light to shoot only at the eleventh hour..."

Another concern was in generating a 'shopping center' buzz when in reality – since the shoots were largely 'overnighters' – the malls were empty save for the crew, some extras and props.

"It was challenging in trying to recreate that lively sense of hustle and bustle you get in a shopping centre in the middle of the night."

"When I see those scenes in edit, I am pleased to say that we pulled it off really well."

Despite the trying shoots and rigidity in adapting to pre-existing conditions, there is an upshot to shooting on location in a shopping center. Her hang-ups with Singapore as a congested shopping haven notwithstanding, Wee cheekily confesses:

"In the midst of the stresses of the shoot, one of the fun things of filming in shopping centers is that when there was down time, we could shop!" ♦



10-12: Kym Ng's character looks for affection