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Lust, Caution



CAUTIOUS LUST

ANG LEE FORGETS HIS MANNERS AND PAINTS THE TOWN RED

by Yayoi Lena Winfrey

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Tony Leung and Tang Wei burn up the screen Ang Lee's NC-17-rated thriller *Lust, Caution*. Photographs by Chan Kam Chuen, courtesy of Focus Features.

ANG LEE

is known for triggering fierce debates over his collection of acclaimed films. With a wide-ranging body of work that includes gay cowboy lovers (**Brokeback Mountain, 2005**), flying, sword-wielding Chinese sorcerers (**Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 2000**), and a gay groom pretending to be straight (**The Wedding Banquet, 1993**), Lee has done anything but play it safe on celluloid. Given the nature of his work, Lee is surprisingly modest in person. In a voice infused with gentle politeness, he explains why he chose his current project—a sexually sizzling, espionage thriller that takes place during the Japanese siege of Shanghai in World War II.

Lust, Caution, which won the Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion Award, spans 159 minutes, received an NC-17 rating by the MPAA, and was censored in China until Lee cut 30 minutes from the explicit near-pornographic bedroom scenes. And that's just the start of the controversy the film seems likely to incite. Certainly, the story's ending will provoke feminist criticism. But once again, Lee tackles a film that a lesser filmmaker might deem too heavy to handle.

The 53-year-old Oscar-winner remains intrigued by the secrets that boil beneath the surface of a person—especially those of his latest protagonist, a woman who exploits her sexuality for nationalism. *Lust, Caution*, which is based on a short story by the late author Eileen Chang, follows an idealistic college student who first falls in love with acting, then with the power that her role-playing creates.

The film begins in 1942 in Shanghai where university student (Wang Jiazhi played by newcomer Tang Wei), abandoned by her father, joins a theatrical troupe at her school's drama department. Caught up in the fervor of her classmates' patriotism, she readily agrees to help trap and eliminate an influential interrogator aligned with the Japanese occupiers (Mr. Yee played by Tony Leung). Unfortunately, things go terribly awry, and the students are forced to discard their plan. But, four years later, they find another opportunity to attempt to assassinate Mr. Yee.

Still committed to the cause, Jiazhi again disguises herself as the wife of a wealthy Hong Kong merchant and infiltrates the Yee household by playing *mah jong* with the gossiping wives of the city's prominent men, including Mrs. Lee (played by Joan Chen). Jiazhi catches the eye of Mr. Yee and the two embark on a sado-masochistic sexual liaison. Playing cat and mouse, they test each other's weaknesses until one ends up losing badly.

The past relationship between China and Japan would be a delicate subject for any moviemaker to deal with. Even today, the Japanese government officially denies any

wrongdoing in the reported atrocities committed by its soldiers against Chinese citizens during the occupation. But for Lee, a Taiwanese-born Chinese man who attended school in America, cross-cultural subjects are a forte.

FILM ARTS Your portrayal of Japanese soldiers during the siege of Shanghai is rather mild. Were you purposely soft on them?

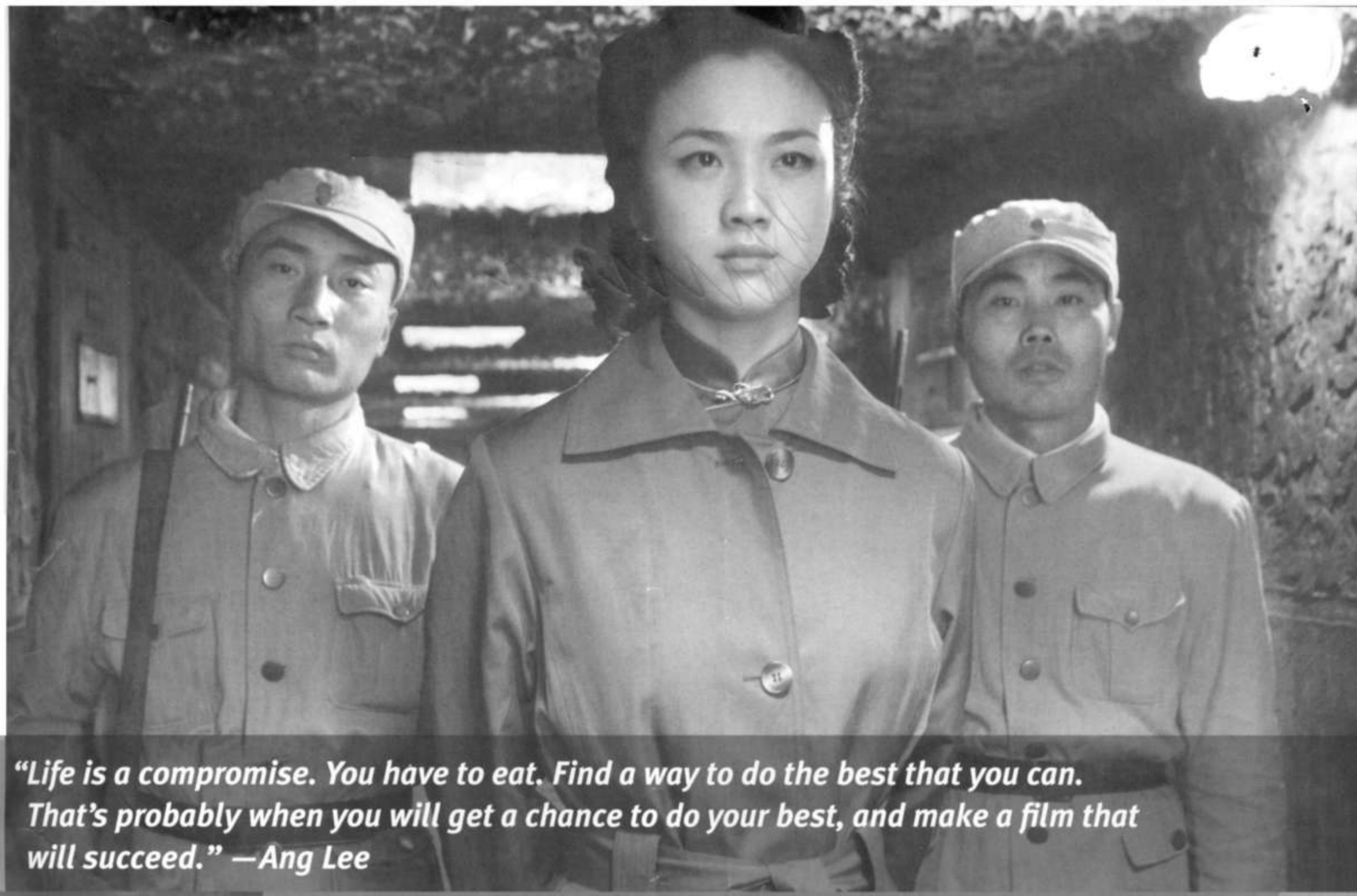
ANG LEE There's one shot in the tavern where Japanese soldiers behave badly towards the girl in the resistance. But that's all I did. The Japanese know failure. Along with the Chinese, they were failures at that point. Yes, I was soft. There was a lot of atrocity in the outskirts of Shanghai, in a lot of towns. But in the city, it was relatively quiet. The Chinese had to take off their hats and bow to the soldiers at the checkpoint, at the bridge.

FA How many of the film's languages—Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, English, French, Russian, and Hindi—do you speak?

AL I speak Mandarin. I understand a lot of Shanghai-ese, but I can't speak it. In post-middle school, on exams, I never used it correctly, but I picked it up. Until *Sense and Sensibility*, my first English-language film, I spoke pretty much pidgin English. Interviews like this really help. (Laughs.)

FA With so many languages in your head, which one do you dream in?

AL I started dreaming in English as a student in New York; that's when I knew I could speak in full sentences. Right now, it's a mixture. Eastern language is more figurative. The Chinese system is a montage composed of groups. English is about spelling, about left and right. I don't know which is in charge of what. Somehow, it's like your head opens up. I think I benefit from it. I did not use English until I was 23.



“Life is a compromise. You have to eat. Find a way to do the best that you can. That’s probably when you will get a chance to do your best, and make a film that will succeed.” —Ang Lee



FA The music in the film was incredible. How much input did you have in selecting it?

AL I worked along with the composer Alexandre Desplat, a French man. A couple of the tunes are so much like old Chinese music of the movies. The reference I gave him was Roy Webb. He’s an old Hollywood composer who did *Cat People* (1942) and worked with Hitchcock. The music is quite Chinese—half of it is, but the other half is Hitchcockian.

don’t think film education is all that important. I think you pick it up by doing it. For someone like me, who was a theater major, film school was actually very good for me. I not only got to touch every aspect of the film—teaching, knowledge—but I got to exercise my leadership on a small scale to develop movies. I can tell from my schoolmates that not everyone is happy about having gone to film school. But it worked out great for me.



Ang Lee recreates 1940s-era Shanghai.

FA The women playing the traditional Chinese game of *mah jong* factor prominently at the beginning of the film. Do you play it?

AL Somebody helped me to arrange the tiles. I don’t know the principle. The real game is going on underneath. I decided what to shoot and how to shoot it. I did watch old ladies in Shanghai. I watched for like an hour. I’m a pro. (Laughs.) A pro filmmaker. (Laughs again.) Give me an hour. I can make something of the *mah jong*—a battle going on inside.

FA Your films reflect your multicultural upbringing and lifestyle.

AL I mix a lot of things because that’s natural to me. That is my style. Sometimes I feel it is hard to channel this approach to the system, to the crowd. I feel lucky that I could do this film, and that I can express myself freely. Sometimes you have to conform to the system. In some ways, that’s not natural. But after all, you make movies for other people. Movies run for two hours, not 20 years.

FA You’re a well-educated filmmaker with a BFA in theater arts from the University of Illinois and an MFA from the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU. Do you feel formal education is important for filmmakers?

AL Not really. There are many ways you can learn. Hong Kong filmmakers are close to illiterate. They grow up in the studios. They know cinema so well. They not only know shots and action, but also tempo and continuity. I

FA What important advice do you have for upcoming filmmakers?

AL Life is a compromise. You have to eat. Find a way to do the best that you can. That’s probably when you will get a chance to do your best, and make a film that will succeed.

■ **Yayoi Lena Winfrey** is a freelance writer, filmmaker, and visual artist based on the West Coast.