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By Guest Contributor Matthew Johnson

Was it real? While anticipation for the release of *Lust, Caution* built, one perennial question followed director Ang Lee’s most recent feature: were the sex acts performed by its two stars, Tony Leung and Tang Wei, simulated or full? The parties involved played coy. Lee himself spoke sparingly of the closed sets and skeleton film crew used to film these scenes. While he would later lament the ceaseless focus on his film’s erotic content, however, Lee could hardly be disappointed with the outcome. *Lust, Caution* reveled in its superstar cast, splashy publicity, and arresting imagery. Released in both edited and unedited versions, it successfully played by the rules of multiple film ratings and review commissions while earning the respect of audiences worldwide. Box office and rental profits remain high. In short, Lee returned to form as a director capable of courting worldwide admiration for his mastery of spectacle and fantasy. And unlike his two actors, he hardly broke a sweat.

Initial reactions to the film were mixed. *Hollywood Reporter* coverage of the Venice International Film Festival, where *Lust, Caution* debuted on August 30, 2007 noted that the film brought to mind “what soldiers say about war: that it’s long periods of boredom relieved by moments of extremely heightened excitement.” Yet festival judges disagreed, awarding Ang Lee his second Golden Lion in two years (the first was for the 2005 release *Brokeback Mountain*). Nor did U.S. co-producer Focus Features necessarily play up the film’s sexual imagery. One plot synopsis circulated by the company remains fairly close to the details of the eponymous Eileen Chang story on which the screenplay was based:

*Shanghai, 1942. The World War II Japanese occupation of this Chinese city continues in force. Mrs. Mak, a woman of sophistication and means, walks into a café, places a call, and then sits and waits. She remembers how her story began several years earlier, in 1938 China. She is not in fact Mrs. Mak, but shy Wong Chia Chi. With WWII underway, Wong has been left behind by her father, who has escaped to England. As a freshman at university, she meets fellow student Kuang Yu Min. Kuang has started a drama society to shore up patriotism. As the theater t*
Groupe’s new leading lady, Wong realizes that she has found her calling, able to move and inspire audiences and Kuang. He convenes a core group of students to carry out a radical and ambitious plan to assassinate a top Japanese collaborator, Mr. Yee. Each student has a part to play; Wong will be Mrs. Mak, who will gain Yees’ trust by befriending his wife and then draw the man into an affair. Wong transforms herself utterly inside and out, and the scenario proceeds as scripted until an unexpectedly fatal twist spurs her to flee. Shanghai, 1941. With no end in sight for the occupation, Wong having emigrated from Hong Kong goes through the motions of her existence. Much to her surprise, Kuang re-enters her life. Now part of the organized resistance, he enlists her to again become Mrs. Mak in a revival of the plot to kill Yee, who as head of the collaborationist secret service has become even more a key part of the puppet government. As Wong reprises her earlier role, and is drawn ever closer to her dangerous prey, she finds her very identity being pushed to the limit…

Nonetheless, the sex scenes included in Lust Caution have dominated almost all media discussion of the film, despite other worthy qualities it may have possessed. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) promptly gave it an NC-17 rating, guaranteeing that screenings and audiences would remain limited. In China, substantial portions of the explicit scenes were excised entirely. State news agency Xinhua reported that these cuts were made by Lee himself, and totaled as much as 30 minutes of the 157 minute film (the final “edited” version runs at 148 minutes). Lee defended these actions to USA Today by asserting on September 12, 2007 that his reputation in China also represented a kind of “burden” for the director. Speaking again to Xinhua, he emphasized that it was Chinese viewers who might feel “uneasy” and “shocked” not only by the explicit material, but also some of the violence of the film as well. These sensibilities were not tested by Brokeback Mountain, which despite Lee’s reputation received no official support in China.

It should be noted, however, that United States audiences were initially given little opportunity to appreciate the unedited version, which during its opening week in New York played to a single theater (although earning $61,700, which placed it among the year’s best films in terms of per-theater
average). By October, Focus Films had released *Lust, Caution* in 19 theaters and was earning approximately $22,000 per, during a month when art house theaters were generating strong numbers overall. Yet Focus executives remained hesitant to push the film, which U.S. CEO James Shamus described as “a very Asian film ... whose politics and sexuality are challenging.” While the Western press gave *Lust, Caution* mixed reviews, the film was greeted as a sensation in Taiwan, where it was shown uncut and opened in 95 theaters to generate a $2.9 million September record. Hong Kong box offices reported similarly exuberant numbers. The largest totals, however, came from the mainland, where despite releasing only Lee’s tamer “director’s cut” distributor The China Film Group boasted a four-day opening total of $5.4 million.

Among mainland audiences, however, the existence of an alternate, potentially titillating version of Ang Lee’s new masterpiece created additional demand, with interesting consequences. China University of Political Science and Law student Dong Yanbin filed a lawsuit against the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) alleging that the organization had infringed on his “consumer rights” and “society’s public interest,” while demanding that SARFT apologize and pay him compensation for “psychological damages.” Pirated uncensored versions of *Lust, Caution* available for download turned out to be rife with viruses. Rumors of mainland couples traveling overseas for romantic viewings of the unedited cut also surfaced. Hong Kong, which maintains its own film review board, was the most frequently-mentioned destination.

Lee has not been the only beneficiary of his erotic thriller’s international success. Independent festivals in the United States warmed to the director only gradually, particularly following the box-office triumphs of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Yet stars Tony Leung and Tang Wei have gone straight to the big time, with both nominated for honors at the Film Independent’s 2008 Spirit Awards; Tang alone received a nomination for the Orange Rising Star award at the British Academy Film and Television Awards.
BAFTA). All of which paled in comparison with reception of the film and its makers in Taiwan, where the Taiwanese Golden Horse Awards credited *Lust, Caution*, Lee, Leung, and Tang with Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Newcomer respectively (Lee was also awarded Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year, while *Lust, Caution* co-star Joan Chen won Best Actress for her role in another film).

This contrasts with the somewhat surprising response of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences, which rejected the film as Taiwan’s entry for Best Foreign Language Film Category at the 80th Annual Academy Awards (2008). Oscar spokespeople described the film as having insufficient Taiwanese participation. Controversy over *Lust, Caution* related to its country of origin has indeed followed the film. Prior to its debut at the Venice International Film festival Lee’s work was labeled a “USA/China” co-production, based on the involvement of United States companies Focus Features and River Road Productions, and Chinese companies Haishang Films (Shanghai Film Group Corporation) and Hai Sheng Film Production Company (Taiwan). Later the producers’ respective countries of origin were given as “USA/China/Taiwan, China,” whereupon the Taiwanese Mainland Affairs Council wrote to the festival protesting the wording. Other festivals and awards labeled *Lust, Caution* an entry of “Taiwan.” If such events count as controversies, they have nonetheless failed to adversely affect the commercial success of the film in any appreciable way. Produced for an estimated $15 million, *Lust, Caution* has grossed close to an estimated $10 million worldwide while pulling in approximately $16.5 million in U.S. video rentals alone.

Yet there are also reports that participation in *Lust, Caution* has also created longer-term problems for the film’s stars. An early March 2008 memo circulated internally by SARFT ordered that television and other media content featuring actress Tang Wei be pulled. No reason was given for the decision, which effectively ended broadcast of a series of advertisements for skin care brand Pond’s featuring Tang and limited her exposure in the
mainland press. Hong Kong sources have speculated that this decision reflects dissatisfaction with the sexual nature of Tang’s performance, and that it corresponds with a public statement issued by SARFT, entitled “Reassertion of Censorship Guidelines,” which informed film and broadcast companies that the state would be renewing prohibitions against “lewd and pornographic content” and depictions of “promiscuous acts, rape, prostitution, sexual intercourse, sexual perversity, masturbation, and male/female sexual organs and other private parts.” SARFT had issued an earlier injunction in December 2007, warning directors that they would face “the heaviest punishment” for films with overtly erotic content. SARFT also warned that directors submitting films with such content to overseas festivals might find themselves barred from directing for a period. The earlier list of prohibited depictions included “rape, whoring, obscene sex exposing human genitals, sex freaks, vulgar conversations, nasty songs, and sound effects with sexual connotation.”

If anything, English-language media coverage of Lust, Caution, including that provided by the Chinese state press, indicates that Ang Lee’s most recent film has proven popular for several reasons. The director’s star has risen internationally. He is gifted at working within numerous national contexts, and willing to dialogue with authorities concerning the limits which these different systems can accommodate. Lee declined to follow MPAA guidelines ensuring that Lust, Caution would receive an R rating, acknowledging that popular enthusiasm for this “Asian” topic would probably be limited in the United States anyway. In China, by contrast, he has capitalized on flexibility where given the opportunity. As noted by the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences, Lee does indeed eschew employing “sufficient” numbers of Taiwanese in his film crews, placing
emphasis instead on assembling an international cast of talent capable of winning awards beyond the narrow Best Foreign Language Film Category of the Oscars. The sensitive nature of geopolitics across the Taiwan Strait, or state attempts to stem the tide of a rising sex industry, may occasionally disturb the hermetic chamber of “art” which Lee has constructed around his career. They have not, however, compromised its structural and economic integrity.

The immense prestige conferred upon Ang Lee by his international successes has, perhaps unsurprisingly, become a tremendous source of pride for many members of Lee’s Chinese audience. Even those disturbed by the “humanistic” depiction of the relationship between a collaborator and patriotic student/spy have often proved willing to commend the director for his creation of a Hollywood-sized success that showcases Chinese actors with nuance and daring (this same depth, it should be noted, is not extended to the film’s Japanese characters, who during their brief appearances are depicted as either submissive hostesses or boorish, drunken officers, each according to stereotype). One stereotype that Lust, Caution does break with: that of the risqué Chinese film “banned” by mainland authorities. Tang Wei’s recent and much-publicized plight aside, thematic innovation and multinational productions will continue to thrive in China’s rapidly-expanding exhibition industry, so long as filmmakers and the state can agree on who the protagonists should be.

Matthew Johnson is a Ph.D. Candidate at University of California, San Diego and has recently accepted a position for next year at University of Oxford. (This article written using material from: The Hollywood Reporter, Studio Briefing, World Entertainment News Network(WENN), and the IMDb database. Any additional errors are the responsibility of the author.)