

Froukje Tan about KUNG FU LION

“The real leader must take the back seat”

Two frustrated teenage boys train at the same Kung Fu school. Jimmy is on the verge of becoming a troublemaker, eager to use his Kung Fu for power and prestige. His ego is bruised when Li Jie joins the school – the new kid in town has great martial arts skills. To curb their rivalry, the shifu pairs them together to perform as part of a prestigious lion dance ceremony, a traditional symbol of good luck and prosperity. As the teenagers bond through the course of their training, they seem to have more in common with each other than simply Kung Fu.

This Dutch film with dancing lions and fighting Kung Fu warriors starts – how could it be otherwise – with an old Chinese story about lions and dragons.

Are you deeply involved in that rich Chinese mythological world?

Froukje Tan: As a member of a Kung Fu school, I've been practicing the slow version known as Tai Chi every day for over 20 years. Kung Fu is part of who I am; that's why I absolutely

had to tell this story. I promised it to my Kung Fu brothers for years, until no one believed it anymore. Now finally it worked out.

Is that where you learned about the lion dance?

Tan: In our school, a Chinese lion always comes to dance at New Year. Once we had one dancing on pots, like at the end of the movie. The collaboration between the dancers is impressive, but I always wondered what it felt like to sit in the lion's butt. Until I realised that it was not about individual virtuosity, but about collaboration. The real leader must take the back seat.

The authenticity of your story can't be questioned. After all, the film was shot in co-production with China.

Tan: Eight years ago, the Netherlands and China concluded a treaty on co-production, but that turned out not to be easy. We participated in 'Bridging the Dragon', an industry event in which European and Chi-



nese projects pitch for each other to stimulate collaboration. The cultural difference was striking: I found most Chinese projects incomprehensible, while they did not understand why we made a film especially for children. Ultimately we found the right people. It took a long time before all contracts were signed, but we were approved and certificated for the Chinese market. I'm hoping for a Chinese release – I'm really looking forward to that.

Your previous children's film SWCHWRM (2012) was a very literary sto-

ry. How do you manage to make two such different films?

Tan: I adapt to the story that needs to be told. I try to imagine something and that's how I film it. That's what I like about this job: you think of something and then it comes to life. Because SWCHWRM was more of a poem, I remained a bit detached. But with KUNG FU LION I wanted to touch people emotionally. That's why I had to get inside that lion – that perspective was the closest I could get to Jimmy.



Did you work closely together with the Chinese community in the Netherlands?

Tan: It is not easy to get Kung Fu schools to work together, because they each hold on to their own style. But we made it happen! My Kung Fu brothers helped train the dancers.

Is it so difficult to get all those schools to use the same style?

Tan: Style differences are huge, and schools assume that *“our style is better than yours”*. The most clear and obvious difference is between the northern style - which looks very acrobatic with high jumps, like Li Jie fights in the film - and the southern style, that’s more of a powerful ‘working-class style’. I thought it was nice to mix these different traditions together.

A lot of communication in the film is done through hand gestures.

Tan: They were taught by the shifu. His name is Kar-Yung Lau and he is a legendary actor from the Chinese martial arts genre.

Tell me more!

Tan: He is known by martial arts fans all over the world. In the 80s he was an action hero who acted alongside Jackie Chan, among others. When he



arrived on set, he immediately knew everything better; everything here was going far too slowly for his liking. So I explained to him that we were making a movie for kids and that it wasn’t so much about the action, but about the characters and what they feel. He understood - from then on we were friends. He said, *“I’ll give you everything I know and you can do whatever you want with it.”* When he later saw the film, he gave me the biggest compliment: *“This is really about Kung Fu, about Kung Fu schools and how we are like family to each other. Films are rarely made about that.”*

His mentorship was practical rather than spiritual?

Tan: He had quite a few scenes with dialogue, until it turned out that he barely understood English. I threw out almost all the dialogue and he brought everything back to the purely physical. He was trained as a shifu by his mother, true to the family style. I asked him to teach his film pupils in the same tradition. This shifu specialised in the lion dance and had to convey his knowledge through animal gestures. I gave him a clear order: from those tiger-like positions, approach the lion and make him jump

for the first time. By allowing him freedom, everything happened spontaneously – that’s how you create magical moments on set. The way in which he finds faults with everyone in the group session is completely spontaneous. That’s how my shifu would do it too.

“There can be Kung Fu in everything,” he says, as he is cutting vegetables.

Tan: Kung Fu literally means: to excel at something through a lot of practice. But for that you need to give attention, love and focus. Which you can only do if you really want to learn something.

Your main actors must have physical qualities!

Tan: First I found Haye Lee (*playing Li*) and he was really good, so we had to find someone to match his capacities. Acting experience was useful, but to perform those martial arts scenes you firstly need the skills. Children who practice martial arts are used to listening to a coach; they pick up my instructions much more easily. Kung Fu is above all very graceful, and this film could look a bit more rough – so actors could also come from karate or taekwondo. I came across Tyrell Williams through a call on a martial arts website. He has such a nice smile, but



some find him too grumpy.

Why is Jimmy always angry?

Tan: When you're 14 or 15 years old, your parents are by definition annoying, right? Jimmy considers his father to be a softie, a loser who should more often stand up for himself. He is also angry because he tries so hard to do everything right, but that goes unnoticed. He tells the shifu that he wants to be the best, and then the guy just puts him in the lion's ass.

Did Tyrell and Lee have the right physical qualifications?

Tan: They trained hard. It can take years to learn that lion dance, and they had to do it in a few days. It's not just about flexibility, but also about strength. That lifting is pretty tough. That's why the roles were cast correctly: the power needs to be in the back.

Those Kung Fu fights also require a special sound design.

Tan: In martial arts films, those whooshing sounds are often added underneath every gesture... "phew... swoosh..." like in a cartoon. We didn't want to exaggerate that; this story didn't have to be cartoonish. But now and then we have the deep growl of a real lion mixed into the sound.

And then there is the sound of the drums.

Tan: The dance goes like this: the lion sleeps and when he wakes up, he is hungry. He has to go after his prey: a head of lettuce. If he can grab the lettuce and crush it, good luck will come to everyone in the new year. The dance builds up to the moment when the lion jumps to grab the lettuce, and all these ritual movements are led by the drums. Just like for the movements, we mix different traditions in the drum patterns. We brought in an expert to merge both styles - north and south - into the rhythm. The young Kung Fu brothers were not used to playing drums in that particular style. They had to learn it from the shifu - so the scared, uncertain look on that drumming girl's face is real.

And the music is - let me guess! - a fusion of different styles?

Tan: It was made in China. Through the Dutch-Chinese co-production, we had Chinese animation, two Chinese actors and a Chinese composer. Through one actors' connections we ended up with perhaps the most famous Chinese film composer. Roc Chen worked on the soundtrack with Joshua C. Love, an American professor with a profound knowledge of



Chinese music.

You also use traditional Chinese elements in the art design, e.g. the transitions between certain scenes.

Tan: I made those abstract decorations myself. At night I sat at the table with glass jars, water and ink. Those flowing lines were an oriental-looking element that I used to fit scenes together. It looks like water in an aquarium. Did you know that I even cast the fish for the aquarium in the film myself? I wanted them to open their mouths in a certain way. At one point in the film, Jimmy feels more affinity

with the fish than with his parents. I am keeping the aquarium now at my home.

—
Gert Hermans