

Spring 2016 (Issue 59)

FROM THE EDITORS

This issue of News and Reviews brings together three striking films that raise questions about identity, gender, and sexuality in a variety of Asian contexts.

My Way follows two male actors in the Cantonese Opera as they try to pursue careers as *Qian Dan*, or males playing female lead roles.

In *I Am*, a filmmaker returns to India, a country she had left twenty-one years earlier following her mother's death there, and through a reverie focused on old photographs explores how laws against homosexuality and restrictive social norms shaped her own life as well as those of a series of people who have come out in India.

Tales of the Waria is a nuanced exploration of four waria, "men who live as women believing they were born with the souls, feelings, and instincts of a woman."

All three films present complex realities, where individual lives play out in contexts that embrace both long-standing traditions and new ways of thinking about identity and the ways we define gender. Revealed are worlds where both tradition and new, often Western labels ("gay," "transgender," etc.) are revealed to be descriptors that do not do justice to the web of relationships, experiences, and desires that make up individuals.

Editor,

Elizaeth Oyler

FILM REVIEW

My Way

Directed by Cheung Cheuk. 2012. 72 minutes. In Chinese with English subtitles.

Reviewed by I-In Chiang.



“I wish to be a Dan role some day; it is my goal.” – Wing-lun Tam

“But if I continue this profession, I will only be a Dan performer!” – Hau-wei Wong

A Qian Dan (male Dan) is a female character in Chinese opera portrayed by a man. The documentary *My Way*, director Cheuk Cheung’s debut, depicts the dreams of two Cantonese Opera actors, Hau-wei Wong and Wing-Lun Tam, as they train to become male Dan. *My Way* follows them over seven years, from 2004 to 2010, as they encounter various difficulties on the road towards their dreams. This documentary makes people think, “Are Wong and Tam on the same path?”

The male Dan is a tradition in Chinese opera, especially well-known in the Peking Opera. One of the most famous male Dan in modern history is Lanfang Mei (1894-1961), who was popular in the early 20th century, not only in China but also in Europe, the United States, and in other parts of East Asia as well. Mei was famous for portraying female characters (“Dan”), usually playing the female protagonist. Because Mei toured around the globe as a male Dan, his popularity left people with the impression that male Dan are a common practice in Chinese opera. However, the practice varies in regional theaters, and Cantonese Opera has no such tradition. In Cantonese Opera, male impersonators are often more popular than female impersonators, but sometimes both the male and female leads are performed by women. One of the most famous couples in Cantonese Opera was Maestra Kim Fai Yam (1913-1989) and Maestra Sheut Sin Bak (born 1926), with whom Wong compares Tam and himself. It becomes an interesting comparison given that Tam and Wong comprise a couple played by men, whereas Yam and Bak are both women. The “ways” that Wong and Tam desire to take are, consequently, not conventional ways.

The two men’s “ways” in Cantonese Opera differ. From the outset, there is not a tradition of male Dan in Cantonese Opera. Hau-Wei Wong’s journey to be a male Dan means he is working against societal pressures. *My Way* reveals the difficulties he encounters on the stage and in his family. He rarely gets parts on stage, and he has to support himself with side jobs, including being an MC for opera shows, coaching Cantonese Opera in elementary and high schools, and giving lectures promoting Cantonese Opera to the general public. Wong desires not only to preserve Cantonese Opera by being a female impersonator, but also to

create a new way for Cantonese Opera. His way could be summarized by a couplet he writes in calligraphy: “Yingzi Rouqing,” meaning “handsome postures [yet with] tender affection,” suggesting a mixture of masculinity and femininity. The question then becomes, is his way possible in Cantonese Opera?

Win-Lung Tam faces different difficulties on his journey to succeed in Cantonese Opera. As a child, his story was documented in the film *The Road to a Qian Dan* (Po-Ying Lau, 2004), which tracks eleven-year-old Tam’s peculiar success in being a male Dan. In the 2004 footage, Tam is shown as the talented rising star of Cantonese Opera. Even as a child, the documentary shows he is full of passion for Cantonese Opera while other boys his age are attracted to video games. Tam wishes to be a Dan someday, and he works diligently toward that goal. He achieves this goal, saying in an interview in 2010 that his performance as a Dan on stage was “a major event in [his] life.” However, at the age of twelve, physiology failed him on his way to a male Dan. Tam then decides to continue his way towards Cantonese Opera, but as a “Sheng” role, which is a male role portraying characters such as young scholars, old men, and generals. In other words, he had to move away from the Dan role in order to progress, so his path did not take him in the direction of his dreams. Although Wong envies Tam for his apparent success, Cheuk does not shy away from showing the obstacles in Tam’s way. Tam is expected to fulfill expectations from modern society – success in school – and from the traditional system of Cantonese Opera. His daytime life in school, coupled with his evening life on stage, turns him into a candle that burns at both ends. By 2010, Tam has lost the glow that lit up his face in 2004, and fatigue has replaced his enthusiasm. The wooden trunk Tam drags in *My Way* symbolizes Cantonese Opera for him in 2010 – it is a huge weight that he can barely move. The viewer is left to wonder if Tam will continue on his way in Cantonese Opera.

Gender and sexuality further complicate Wong and Tam’s experiences. Each has his own reasons of dreaming to be a male Dan. Wong says, “If Tam continues his work [to be a Dan], he can be one of the rare male Dan performers in Cantonese Opera.” But Tam claims that he wishes to be a Dan role because “They wear beautiful makeup. They have nice shoes and movements.” Though Tam realizes that his career as a Dan is “doomed” at the age of twelve, he continues his way on Cantonese Opera. His motivations seem caught between a desire to play a woman and to carry on a tradition that now excludes him from doing it. Wong, by contrast, claims that if he cannot play as Dan, he would rather not perform. Unfortunately, Cheuk does not delve into the reason Wong desires to be a Dan, and the audiences can only speculate on this by looking at his perseverance on “the way less traveled.” Where is the way leading each man?

Wong and Tam’s “way” can probably be summarized by their performance as Emperor Guangxu and Consort Zhen that ends the film:

Tam: “Is there happiness left between us? We look at each other, speechless.”

Wong: "But we've had a wonderful time. Our love burgeoned when we met. That was a misty evening in the south."

Tam: "Indeed."

And the opera, or rather, 'the way' goes on.

Even though the appeal of this film for classroom use is somewhat limited because of the subject matter, it's still an interesting look at two engaging personalities. This would be appropriate for a discussion of gender roles and gender identity in a college (or perhaps AP high school) humanities class. It could also be used as an example of gender roles in theater, where it could be compared to Shakespearean casting practices and the like.

I-In Chiang is currently a PhD candidate in East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She received her MA in Comparative Literature at the UIUC. Her research interests include Chinese cinema, Chinese literature and culture, film studies, and women and gender studies.

My Way is distributed by CNEX

FILM REVIEW

I Am

Directed by Sonali Gulati. 2011. 70 minutes. In Hindi and English with English subtitles.

Review by Alice Huang.



After the passing of her mother, filmmaker Sonali Gulati leaves her girlfriend in the US to travel back to India, a country that only recently abandoned the law that criminalized homosexuality. She returns to empty out the home where she and her mom once lived together for twenty-one years.

The title *I Am* is both unfinished and complete. Invisible ellipses stand in for Sonali's unspoken words, the missing object at the end. In the meantime, the title is a complete sentence, a matter-of-fact statement about identity, needing no modifiers.

Her mom used to ask her, "Do you have girlfriends?" Sonali always postponed answering, because, "We all live our lives as if we have plenty of time." She will never know the rest of the conversation. What would have been – how her mom would have reacted to her coming out – is the question Sonali seeks to answer in this documentary. She explores the question privately, through a diary-like voiceover tinted with regret, tracing anecdotes about their close, imperfect relationship in old photographs. She explores the question vicariously through her interviews asking twenty-one other people to reveal their very real experiences of coming out to their families. The myriad ways these families react are the subject of this movie.

Not everyone has the privilege to come out openly, though. When Prince Manvendra Singh Gohil came out publicly in 2006, he risked being disowned, being disinherited, and being assassinated by his own warrior family. The price for eloping, paid for by a same-sex pair of young lovers, is waking up at knifepoint – one girl's family threatens their forever separation – or death. After coming out exuberantly at a pride parade, one woman receives a phone call

from her estranged mother simply saying, “You have shamed us.” But support also comes strong. Some families are loud. An outspoken single mom, allied by her sisters, marches in a pride parade with her gay son. Another mom fondly recalls how she and her husband welcomed their son’s foreign partner in their small flat and threw them a cozy wedding.

The quieter families are no less supportive. To their children’s ears, an understanding “I know,” or an understated “That’s fine,” bring just as much solace and relief. A perceptive and thoughtful mother forecasts how other attendees at an upcoming wedding might react to her teenage daughter’s gender-defying attire and teaches her how to navigate through subtle social quandaries. These parents acknowledge society’s ever-looming oppression, feel their children’s loneliness, and take it upon themselves to continually provide a secure home base for their children. The most remarkable feat of this documentary is how it captures the less often told yet no less powerful story: the vulnerable experiences of people on the receiving end of confessions, the candid narratives of families who have been “came out to.” Sonali’s interviews uncover their strength and honesty. They convey their shock and their difficulties accepting; they admit to having their dreams of heteronormative comforts broken; they look forward to new dreams being born. A considerate mother hides her own doubts and fears as she waits for her adolescent daughter to overcome internal homophobia. A man, having foreseen that his family would be at a loss of what to do, comes out with considerable gentleness, holding his mom’s hand as they take a walk together, caring about how they would feel had more value to him than whether they would accept him. One possible shortcoming of the documentary is how it handled questionable or false statements. A dad, like a doctor lecturing about a rare disease, says definitively that there is one-percent chance for a child to “turn out homosexual.” Multiple interviewees confuse romantic/sexual orientation with gender identity. In fact, Sonali herself maybe conflates the two related but distinct constructs when she follows her voiceovers, “I’m just not interested in men” and “I’m in love ... with a woman,” by standing before a mirror, exposing her butch look for the first time. It remains ambiguous whether these moments reflect ignorance, and they may mislead viewers with limited knowledge about queer identities and perpetuate hurtful myths and stereotypes. It is also possible that these moments reflect a directorial choice, in keeping with the movie’s strolling pace and realist style, to refrain from pausing to correct or argue.

Ultimately, coming out to one’s family is more than just revealing or confirming a piece of information. It is sharing with people important to us something deeply personal. It is laying ourselves bare, and hoping for an affirmation that our love is valid, for an assurance that the foundation of our connection is as unshakable as before, and for a renewed relationship that will be more honest, more open, than ever.

“We would not have been alone in this experience,” Sonali says to herself. Through this moving autobiographical documentary, Sonali Gulati transforms her lonely contemplation about her mother into a catalyst that draws together a warm community of courageous families who are rich with stories of both painful reflection and joyous celebration.

Those stories should find a place in a classroom, but – as much as I hate to say it – I am unsure where they would fit. The segments on Prince Manvendra’s public coming out and on Section 377 (the anti-gay law) would be the most appropriate to use in the classroom, but the most compelling stories (Balli’s and Sonali’s) would be more difficult to find room for. I could, however, see this being shown at a meeting for a school’s LGBT group to give perspective on the difficulties of coming out.

Alice Huang is a PhD student in clinical/community psychology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She studies individuals’ attitudes and beliefs about emotionally vulnerable parts of themselves, and how such attitudes and beliefs relate to emotional wellbeing and close relationships.

For more information on *I Am*, please visit their [website](#).

FILM REVIEW

Tales of the Waria

Directed by Kathy Huang. 2011. 56 minutes. In Indonesian with English subtitles.

Review by Leslie Morrow.



Tales of the Waria explores the stories of Indonesian nationals Suharni, Mami Ria, Tiara, and Firman, four *waria*, or men who live as women believing they were born with the souls, feelings, and instincts of a woman. According to the documentary, *waria* is derived from the words *wanita* (woman) and *pria* (man). Indonesia is home to the world’s largest Muslim population, and director Kathy Huang says that her first inclination was to explore how the *waria* negotiated the role of Islam in their lives. But her interview subjects were not interested in that topic. Instead, they desired a film exposé that would explore how to find lasting love. Huang first discovered the *waria* via a news story in 2005 about the *waria* supermodel pageant, which opens the film. A few years later, a news story revealed that President

Obama had spent some time as a child growing up in Jakarta, in the care of a waria, which prompted Kathy to want to learn more. After taking some Indonesian language classes and seeking the counsel of a well-known anthropologist known for his work with the queer community in Indonesia, she traveled to the town of Makassar, the primary setting for the film.

While it is easy to situate the film and make comparisons to transgender narratives within the U.S., watching the film challenges viewers to understand the waria in their own context. The gaze of this filmmaker shows the waria existing in an environment where they are much respected, as waria traditionally were entrusted to care for kings. Additionally, the film explores the idea of gender confirmation surgery (or gender reassignment surgery/GRS), which waria, who are Muslims, do not pursue because of their faith. *Tales of the Waria* contains many teachable moments throughout the film; most notably, it manages to interrogate our rigid assumptions of masculinity and femininity that often place some of us beyond comfortable means of classification and are, therefore, unknowable. The film encourages the audience to suspend the desire to name and/or classify, because these stories are not and should not be assumed to be representative of all waria. The classification itself, the film argues, is something not equivalent with Western categories like transgender, male, or female. Throughout the film, we hear some of the participants and their desires to be a real man or to be viewed as a real woman, which begs the question, how we come to rely upon rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity in the first place?

The film is part biography and part documentary: it at once traces the stories of the four subjects and raises our awareness of the globalized world we live in. At its heart is a story about love, religion, and self-discovery. Although each profile is different, we witness the struggles as well as the happiness of what it means to waria, or rather, what it means to just *be*.

Mami Ria, a senior, well-respected waria, discusses her childhood, realizing very early that she did not “know how to be a boy.” As a result, she dropped out of school in the third grade because she was told to dress like a boy and was uncomfortable doing so. She eventually traveled to Makassar, where she felt she had a better chance of being accepted. As she explains in the film, it wasn't until she saw another waria in Makassar that she came into her own and discovered, “that [she] wasn't alone and there were others just like [her].” Mami Ria's story becomes even more intriguing when we discover her relationship with a married man. She met her husband while giving him a haircut, and from there, a romance developed. At first, they hid their relationship from his wife, but later we learn that the wife is extremely welcoming. Once again the film challenges us to question our preconceived notions of who and what constitute a family.

Suharni's story is steeped in the love of her boyfriend, in wanting to please and support him. And while some may view this storyline as the antithesis to feminism (at least, Western feminism), Suharni enjoys her life. We discover that she is HIV positive, and we see how her faith not only helps her live with the diagnosis and maintain her dignity, but also provides her with a sense of calm and awareness given the stigma of the disease. As she states, "HIV/AIDS is the most feared disease in Indonesia."

Firman's story also provides an interesting portrayal of the struggles of feeling "different" in a world where difference is often not celebrated. We are introduced to Firman in the early scenes as he is engaged in prayer asking that God, "grant him his wish" to change him into "a real man." The value of the film provides many teachable moments, and this moment is no exception. The normalizing discourses that adhere to fixed categories of identity such as male, female, and masculine and feminine are too often reinforced through the media, schooling, family, and via religion. Who gets counted, who gets to speak for and on behalf of those deemed different or abnormal? Whose experiences matter? At this point in the film, Firman has abandoned life as a waria. Now married with kids, he recounts his past life: his first sexual encounter with a man and the subsequent troubles he encountered with his family, who rejected his past life. Later on in the film, though, we begin to see his struggles of living for others, rather than living for himself, through his repressed desires to be with men and to live as a waria.

Tiara's first appears at the height of the Miss Waria Indonesia Contest. She is a performer in addition to living as a waria. Her childhood has consisted of "simple wishes – to laugh, have fun, be happy." She explains that her family pressured her to not become a waria, forcing her to live a lie and hide her true self. At home, she recalls her muted and submissive behavior, which remains until she is able to escape the confines of her family's expectations. We witness Tiara living for herself and refusing to change.

The film is an engaging exploration of life, love, being, and living. And although life is complicated, this film provides insight into four human beings, their journeys that show the evolution of life, happiness, sadness, and the conviction of their truth(s). The diversity of the waria, how they identify themselves, and how live their lives are all addressed in *Tales of the Waria*, which is ultimately a film about recognizing self-determination and acknowledging everyone's right to be who they are.

As stated earlier, there are several teachable moments throughout the film, and this would be an exceptional addition to the curriculum in a women's/gender studies course in college, as it gives a nuanced and personal portrayal of gender issues from a global perspective.

Unfortunately, the subject matter, although presented with dignity, might make it a bit controversial for use in high school classrooms, except for those in more progressive communities. That's a shame, as issues of religion, gender, and just – well – *being* are universal, and this perspective is one that deserves to be heard.

Leslie Morrow is the current director of the LGBT Resource Center at UIUC. She received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Miami University of Ohio. She is currently pursuing her PhD in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at UIUC. She is invested in social justice, building coalitions, and intersectional works both on- and off-campus. She serves on a variety of committees at the U of I, many of which are devoted to social justice. She is also involved nationally as a member of the National Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, the American Educational Research Association, and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

Tales of the Waria is distributed in the U.S. by New Day Films.