

San Francisco International Film Festival 2010

An interview with Woo Ming-jin, director of *Woman on Fire Looks for Water*, and a comment

David Walsh
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Woman on Fire Looks for Water, screened at the 2010 San Francisco film festival, is an independent film from Malaysia, written and directed by Woo Ming-jin (born 1976). It takes place in a small fishing village. Ah-kau is a fisherman; his son, Ah-fei, sells frogs for a living. Life goes on here, but with few luxuries or pleasures. We witness the daily cutting up of fish and frogs, along with correspondingly elemental human relations.

The boy, Ah-fei, is in love with Lilly, who works in a fish factory and won't marry him unless he has more money. The conversation is direct: "Are we getting married?" "When you have enough money." "How much?" "\$50,000." "That's a lot." "No, it's not." Selling frogs, Ah-fei makes \$700-\$800 a month.

Meanwhile, a reading of his own palm leads the father, Ah-kau, to believe he's going to die. Death is accepted somewhat matter-of-factly in the community. A character says at one point, "When you told me I was going to die, I was actually glad. I've been going out to sea for 50 years. I'm tired of looking at water."

In one of several very simple, truthful scenes, Ah-kau goes to visit the woman he has loved from a distance for many years, Ai Ling. He asks her, "How many times have we met in the last 30 years?" She replies, "Five or six times." He goes on, "I've loved you as long as I can remember.... If your husband died, we could live together. Your husband is strong." She, unsentimentally: "You'll die before he does."

Ah-kau explains that he had once written her a letter, declaring his feelings. "I should have asked you to marry me then.... It's too late now."

Ai Ling's husband is a lowlife. When Ah-kau tells her he's going to see her husband, she says, "Tell him don't bother coming home if he continues to drink." Ah-kau confronts the husband, "You're a drunk and a lousy worker." The husband, lounging in a hammock, shoots back: "She's old and useless. You too."

Ah-fei falls in with a somewhat more affluent family. The father owns a cockle factory. He wants Ah-fei to marry his daughter, with promises of a business and a house. The boy breaks off with Lilly. She asks, "How can you change just like that?" Ah-fei appears to be making the same mistake his father did. Lilly, it turns out, has deep feelings for him.

Woman on Fire Looks for Water is carefully and elegantly done. The best scenes painfully convey how the feelings of these people have been suppressed, and resentments built up, over decades. These are lives that have been sacrificed to hard, even brutal work, with virtually no time left over for emotions. It's difficult to watch the characters at times.

As our exchange below indicates, the director, Woo Ming-jin (*Monday Morning Glory*, *The Elephant and the Sea*), eschews any social purpose in his work. He favors film directors who eschew any social purpose. Nonetheless, social life is there, at the heart of his film. This is a contradiction, which will be resolved one way or another in his future work.

We interviewed Woo by e-mail. The following are his comments.

David Walsh: Can you tell me something about your background and your development as a filmmaker? What drives you to make films?

Woo Ming-jin: I was born and raised in Malaysia. At 19, I went to the US to study business in a small school in Boston, then worked for a while, then decided to be a filmmaker. I'd always wanted to make films since I was around 16, but I studied business because it was "acceptable." I got a scholarship from San Diego State University (the only uni to give me one) to do an MA in film production, so I went for it. It was a great place and for the first time, I felt I was doing something I actually liked.

In 2003, I returned to Malaysia and started making films. I did short films, then I worked on television content, like TV shows, commercials, music videos, etc. I found that I was not inspired by anything while I was in the US, but at home, there were many stories to tell. I'm drawn to the everyday layman world, the people living outside of the city, places that are untouched by time. The more I traveled, the longer I stayed, the more stories I "collected."

I grew up fishing a lot in old mining ponds near my house, so I like places near water. I'm very fond of the ocean, fish, and basically anything related to them. So when I write a story I tend to think of the setting also. I'm basically story-oriented—which means I'm inspired by stories I hear, people I meet, things I see. I try to keep my eyes and ears open everywhere I go—at a restaurant,

while I'm driving, etc. I try to absorb it all.

DW: Could you tell me something about the origin of the idea for this film?

WM: I wanted to make a more personal film, after my last one, *The Elephant and the Sea*, which had a distant feel.

I saw this film, [Pedro Costa's] *Colossal Youth*, and thought it was quite touching, and magical. It stayed with me a long time. I began writing the new film around the end of 2007. I wanted to tell a story that was more intimate, and so I took part of the story from my own experience. The core of this film, to me, is about longing.

Everyone has longed for someone. All these questions I once asked a former lover, but never got answers to, I try to put in the film. This included things I wanted to talk about, but never had a chance. Of course, there are still no answers in the film. If you try looking for them, you'll never find them. That's what I learned. But it took years. So now I get a chance to put it in a film.

The location of this film—a fishing village about two hours from the city—is just my favorite place. I keep going back to it. *The Elephant and the Sea* was also shot there, but in a different area. This place, every time I'm there, I'm inspired.

DW: Achieving simplicity and elegance in action and style is the most difficult artistic challenge. Can you tell me something about how you poetically reduced your story to such simple, truthful dimensions?

WM: Yes, the story is very simple. I'm not quite sure why it took so long to write it (a year and a half). For me, I wanted to find the truth in the characters. I wanted the story to be truthful, to feel so honest and grounded that it can only be true. So the characters in the film, the young boy and girl, they are simple people. They make decisions that may seem irrational, but are practical to them. In this manner, they are pure. But they can't stay pure forever. Something happens. I suppose I wanted to capture this emotion.

DW: Although the greater society is largely not present here, these characters seem very stifled, repressed by social conventions and forces. Could you speak about that problem—if it is a problem—in Malaysian society?

WM: These people, they live outside of the modernization of Malaysia. For them, in this town, little has changed over 20 years. It's like they are stuck in time. It is a hard life. Chinese culture and society function in a certain manner. It differs depending on your background, geography, etc. I don't think it's a problem, it's just how some people are. You should have money if you are to marry a girl, for instance.

DW: Is Ah-kau's coming death self-imposed, is it an illusion? Is his great love a fantasy?

WM: I don't think it's self-imposed. He knows it because he can read palms. He knows he is dying. His former lover, Ai Ling, is his only hope. He reaches out, but he's about 30 years too late. There are fantasy-surrealistic elements in the film, but I'll leave it up to the audience to interpret. The question I wanted to ask also is: does Ai Ling (his great love) regret it too?

DW: The girl first demands that Ah-fei have money, then she claims to be desperate for him. Does she change her mind only because he now has (or possibly has) a new girlfriend, or does she really care for him?

WM: She's a young girl. All her feelings are sincere and real, though it may not seem that way. She only acts how she feels. You may not like someone now, but suddenly feel completely differently. It is unexplained, but it's real. But what can you do to change someone's mind? What can you do?

DW: The scenes of the father and his long-lost love (and her husband) are very moving, and disturbing. So are the scenes of the young lovers. The relationships are very painful in this film. What is preventing these people from enjoying happier, fuller lives with each other?

WM: I'm not sure. The film explores two generations. Unfortunately, both father and son meet the same fate.

DW: Your previous two features dealt with more directly social themes, an epidemic and its consequences, terrorism, the corruption of the authorities—what social conclusions, if any, would you like an audience to draw from your newest film?

WM: I never thought of it that way. I wanted to tell a moving story of a few people I felt close to. There are obviously social issues to all my films, but it's the story I'm interested in. I'm not really trying to highlight anything else.

DW: What are the social conditions in a village like this? Is there an impact from the current global economic crisis?

WM: The town is still around and still functioning. Some are quite well off (as depicted in the film) and own businesses (restaurants, export companies, etc.), while others struggle. Less fish, less money, etc.

The problem with Malaysia is that the middle class is thinning, and the lower class is getting poorer. Wages haven't gone higher in many, many years, yet inflation is crazy. It isn't easy. We shot in this house where the owner tells me he catches one, maybe two fish a day. They are big fish, so it's enough. But many nights, there were none. So if you don't catch anything, you don't have money.

DW: What is the state of Malaysian cinema? What are your biggest film influences?

WM: Malaysian cinema is getting better. We are becoming more of a force. There are not enough of us, unfortunately.

I grew up watching the French New Wave, then the Chinese, Iranians and US independents. I like many kinds of films, and right now, I'm a big Hong Sang-soo fan, also Hirokazu Kore-eda, Carlos Reygadas, and Pedro Costa.



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