

Review of *Spider Lilies*
Director: Zhou Meiling
Cathay-Keris Films
Encore Films



Image from <http://www.encorefilms.com/spiderlilies/index.html>

Spider lilies are wild orchids with bright orange petals. These are poisonous flowers, suitable for inclusion among the mythological flora adorning the entrance of hell. *Spider Lilies*, starring Ranie Yang as Jade and Isabella Leong as Bamboo, was directed by Zero Leong won the 57th Teddy Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival. The link to the trailer provides a quick glimpse of *Spider Lilies*. <http://www.encorefilms.com/trailer/SpiderLilies-trailer01.wmv>

The story began with Jade sitting in front of a laptop teasing on-line voyeurs, which she does nightly. Her grandma suddenly appears and sits in front of the webcam munching watermelon while Jade is not looking. Complaints that their host has turned into a 100-year-old weirdo flooded the call centre and Jade is chided by a manager from the virtual franchise the next morning. While the grandma's role is ridiculous, she provides a contrast of the wisdom of the aged against youthful ignorance. In one storeroom scene, grandma fishes a missing green wig from a black garbage bag with her wrinkled hands for Jade. In another scene in the bedroom, grandma walks in and slams the laptop when Jade screams in tears at her on-line voyeur. Grandma's gesture also prevents Jade from being traced by the police

officer who is trying to locate her (laptop). Crying frantically in grandma's arms, Jade is soothed with these lines in Taiwanese Mandarin:

“It's ok,...enough already...told you not to play with computer so late, you silly girl...don't cry... grandma's good girl”

Jade's multiple contrasting characters are interesting. Despite being an accomplished adult teaser manoeuvring the electronic monitor that deducts points using a credit-card paying system, Jade is a vulnerable child seeking comfort in the arms of a computer illiterate. Jade's internal discontent with her parents, whom she never met, is traced from her play as a child, talking to a plastic toy phone at the age of 9. In the scene, she throws the phone away to chase after a friend, Bamboo. In several cycling scenes, Jade rides home on Bamboo's bicycle, giving herself a sense of joy and closing the gap of loneliness of a deserted child. At the same time, the exposed long orange-brown spider lily tattooed on Bamboo's arm leaves an indelible impression of plenitude on Jade.¹

Dramatically, the great Taipei earthquake separates Jade and Bamboo. However, Jade remains adamant and determines to look for Bamboo after she grows up. She uses her memory of the spider lily tattoo as her guide and even mistakes the policeman who intends to ambush the voyeur website as the missing person. Their on-line communication illustrates a stuttering policeman developing a one-sided love for Jade, which parallels Jade's one-sided attempt to look for Bamboo.

At the same time, Bamboo is fighting her own guilt at the other end of Taipei city. She loses her father on the same night she slept with her high school girlfriend. To deal with the inner pain, she had spider lilies tattooed on her arm (symbolising a sinful person who deserves to be in hell). She eventually becomes a popular tattooist among the male patrons. The story implies different reasons male and female wear tattoos. Tattoos provide confidence to the male whereas females use tattoos to cover-up painful memories. Tattoos serve as

reminders for females on the one hand and on the other hand, tattoos become part of the male psyche in this story. It can be deduced further that tattoos appeal to the intrapersonal intelligence of females as their personal semiotics, whereas they form the interpersonal make up of males as a social signature.²

The theme song of this film involves a little white jasmine and provides a refreshing symbolic contrast to the sombre orangey spider lilies. Jasmine represents the demeanour of Jade, who is chatty, curious and explorative in her daily routines. Spider lilies symbolise the personality of Bamboo, who is reserved, temperamental and cold. It is the jasmine-like Jade who initiates the persistent pursuit of her happiness. Jade repeatedly requests to be tattooed by Bamboo when she eventually meets her.

Viewers who prefer the multiple stimulation of criss-cross talking in many voices may find this film a challenge. This is a leisurely paced movie with considerable amount of dialogue between the two lead actresses in the scenes. The typical lengthy mode of non-verbal interaction in this Taiwanese movie requires sustained listening interest. The exploitation of an on-line adult chat-room in the film is an attraction to members of the younger generations, who are ICT (Information Communication Technology) savvy.³ The techno-angle used in the movie reflects a strategic alignment with a younger audience.

Moral values are part and parcel of good practice in either the commercial or social spaces in ASEAN.⁴ However, they do not prevent an examination of the ongoing issue on sexuality in the film.⁵ Indeed, *Spider Lilies* as a media resource captures a particular strand of language-culture. It offers a platform to reflect on many issues that are rampant in late modern 21st century societies. Interrelating with the complex network of humanities, the movie provides a model of multimodal entry to learning about self and others. The use of flowers as a cultural symbol situates visual-spatial intelligence with environmental intelligence. Viewers may explore the emotional trappings caused by absent parents, while

morbid retribution from irresponsible behaviour such as bullying serves as a good deterrent to recalcitrant youngsters. The importance of family as the foundation of a society remains salient in the film.

Notes

¹ See the notion of desire in Sew, JW, 2007 Review of Cameron and Kulick, Language and Sexuality. *Intersections* 15, http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue15/sew_review.htm.

² See David Lazear, *Eight Ways of Teaching with Multiple Intelligences*, Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight Professional Development, 1999

³ Fung, Loretta and Ronald Carter. 2007. New varieties, new creativities: ICQ and English-Cantonese e-discourse. *Language and Literature* 16 (4): 345-366.

⁴ See Ng, Yi-Sheng, *SQ21: Singapore queers in the 21st century*. Singapore, Oogachaga. 2006.

⁵ Grose, Michael, 'Talking to Your Kids About Sex' in *Reader's Digest Health Smart* 2007 Premiere Issue: 18-19.

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