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Image: 2019 *Adelaide//International*, installation view
featuring Ming Wong, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia.
Photograph by Sam Noonan.



In a holiday colour snapshot taken in 1972, **Ming Wong**—then about one year old—is sitting in a small pram, foreground and centre to the picture but looking away from the camera, distracted. His mother stands behind, one hand on the pram. She is looking directly at the viewer with an expression that suggests the unseen photographer is not yet ready. A confident, modern tourist, she is smartly dressed, wearing a yellow-ochre blazer, a colourful scarf, a red hat that matches her dress, and a white handbag draped casually across her left forearm. Elegant.

They are in the Piazza San Marco, Venice, on a clear day, with St Mark's basilica and the towering Campanile immediately behind. It's a good, memorable shot and seemingly straightforward, other than for the fact that she is Asian—Chinese, in fact; a Singaporean. Not exactly out of place, but for the era and the European context—to some eyes at least—different!

Thirty-seven years later, Wong will return to Venice, where his exhibition *Life of Imitation*—commissioned for the Singapore Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009—will elevate him to international attention.

Ming Wong makes films; *In Love for the Mood* (2009) is one of three that comprised his Venice exhibition. Each of his projects have a constant: they are reworkings of particular scenes taken from celebrated world cinema classics, moments—typically rich in emotion—he has chosen specifically for what they offer as material for his own purpose. And where the original film tells a complete story (in this case, Wong Kar Wai's 2000 film of unconsummated desire, *In the Mood for Love*, set in 1960s Hong Kong), Wong's objective is different.

Having chosen his cinematic moment to appropriate, Wong sets about representing it in his own unique way, examining it repetitively and forensically from alternative viewpoints, crafting it in a manner that amplifies the viewer's awareness of specific details such as speech and gesture. Yet the result confounds certainty as to what is actually happening as a narrative, or what is exactly intended. Typically, Wong will use the same actor to play duplicate roles and different genders in the same scene, or he may repeat the scene using different actors each time, of differing ethnicities. Often it is himself performing. He takes great care to achieve a professional filmic effect with his use of costume, colour, lighting, music and dialogue.

In the case of *In Love for the Mood*, Wong's chosen moment is a scene where Mrs So (Maggie Cheung in the original) is rehearsing with Mr Chow (Tony Leung) to accuse her husband of adultery. Here, Wong's Mrs So and Mr Chow are both performed over three vignettes by a Caucasian actress from New Zealand. Portrayed in the first scene as struggling to effectively deliver her lines in Cantonese, the actress is clearly miscast. An off-camera Wong is prompting her. In two subsequent scenes, subtitled respectively in English and then Italian, she becomes more confident and her acted Cantonese more accomplished. In all of this, Wong effectively conjures questions of meaning that have additional complexity (and interest) through his emphasis on portraying the cumbersome process of rehearsal, in contrast to the actual performed rehearsal of the appropriated scene.

Growing up in Singapore, Wong's preoccupations as an artist have been much influenced by that country's rich history of multiculturalism and its progressive moves to independence from colonial beginnings. Wong is particularly enamoured of the period following World War Two that ushered in a golden age of cinema and a buoyant multi-ethnic and multilingual culture. However, with the establishment of the Republic of Singapore as an independent and sovereign state in 1965—following the drama of racial disruption that came with Singapore's brief merger with Malaysia and the military confrontation (*Konfrontasi*) with Indonesia—a culture of homogeneity gradually evolved, displacing the diversity of the past.

Wong's films, then, can be understood as being opposed to the levelling effects of government-driven culture and the loss of differentiation—especially of language—that results. He thus deliberately selects actors to perform roles for which—because of their race and gender, for example—they would not conventionally be chosen.

He is about social relations, language, identity, and celebrating difference.

Ming Wong: In Love for the Mood

SIULI TAN

Originally commissioned for and presented at the Singapore Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, Ming Wong's *In Love for the Mood* (2009) considers the means through which subjectivity is constructed in cinema as well as through the performative veneers of everyday life.

Well known for his retelling and reinterpretation of world cinema classics such as Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* (1974), Wong deliberately miscasts himself and others in iconic roles, often playing several different characters in a foreign language to disassemble constructions of identity, gender, and culture.

In *In Love for the Mood*, Wong reinterprets Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai's iconic movie *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by substituting a Caucasian actress in dual lead roles. As the actress struggles with the unfamiliar language, the film's exploration of issues of identity is elevated against the backdrop of heartbreak, a universal condition that transcends race or language.

In Love for the Mood was presented as part of 'Life of Imitation', a body of work that includes *Four Malay Stories* (2005)—a tribute to P. Ramlee, an icon of the Malay entertainment industry—as well as another new commission, *Life of Imitation*, Wong's take on Douglas Sirk's 1959 *Imitation of Life*. Collectively, these works—for which Wong received a Special Mention Award—pay homage to Singaporean and Malaysian cinema's golden age of movie-making from the 1950s to the 1970s, an epoch referenced in *In the Mood for Love*'s mannered melodrama as well as Wong's re-visiting of P. Ramlee's forgotten classics. At Venice, this significant period of Singapore's cultural history was referenced by the inclusion of artworks by Neo Chon Teck, Singapore's last cinema billboard painter, in a nod to a dying art that, along with the heavy red drapes installed in the Venetian palazzo, harked back to a bygone age of cinema.

These historic references go beyond mere nostalgia, however. As noted by Tang Fu Kuen, the curator for the 2009 Singapore Pavilion, this era coincided with a significant period of "nation-building, struggle, rapid modernisation and cultural flux. Multiple worlds co-existed then where language, appearance and tradition were continually negotiated". Cinema was thus "the site par excellence that captured the complex cultural relations and knowledge production during this epoch of change"¹. This fluid and dynamic cultural milieu was reflected in Singapore's pre-1965 multi-ethnic film industry, now standing in sharp contrast with present-day Singapore, where national policies have resulted in a homogenisation of languages,² among other systematically implemented boundaries and frameworks for categorising and organising identity and social life.

In Wong's works, language and identity are in flux and constantly renegotiated. *In Love for the Mood* re-enacts a scene from *In the Mood for Love* where Mrs Su (originally played by the luminous Maggie Cheung) rehearses for a confrontation with her husband, preparing to accuse him of infidelity. In Wong's version, the roles of both Mrs Su and her confidante Mr Chow (Tony Leung in the original movie) are enacted by the same Caucasian actress (Kluane Saunders). The scene plays out over three screens as Wong, off-screen, prompts Saunders with the Cantonese lines, which she initially repeats with halting unfamiliarity and palpable frustration. The third channel of this video installation captures her final take, Saunders at last at ease with her script as well as her persona, delivering her lines with a nuanced poignancy.

The actress's repetition of her lines—and her gradual mastery of both the language and her role—suggest that language and identity are learned and familiarised over time, both “requiring continual re-enactment to bring them into being”.³ That the scene is framed as a rehearsal of a rehearsal adds further critical piquancy to the notion of multiple performative veneers that are open to destabilisation and renegotiation. The disjuncture and disconnect between the miscast actor playing a role which has already been fixed in the collective cultural imagination as belonging to an actor of a different ethnicity, gender and/or culture, critically foregrounds a recognition of difference(s), even as it reaches towards a shared empathy of universal human experiences.

The staging of *In Love for the Mood*'s vignette over multiple screens is a mode employed by Wong in several of his works. By deconstructing and reworking films across numerous projections—thereby replacing the immersive single screen of traditional cinema, which assumes a narrative continuity and more passive mode of spectatorship—Wong facilitates a new and often critical reception of a specific and familiar film fragment.

Despite Wong's use of these distancing techniques—which extend to the inclusion of false starts and outtakes—the scenes are still “remarkably poignant, proving the power of cinema to suck us into its affective realm”.⁴ This affective dimension of Wong's work lies in part in exposing vulnerabilities, be they in Saunders' attempts to master a foreign language and the emotional engagement of a scene, or those of Wong himself when he tackles a role in a foreign language, such as in *Learn German with Petra von Kant* (2007).

This willingness to put oneself in a position of vulnerability through attempting to inhabit a culture or cultural role speaks of an openness to difference, and an empathy in encounters with the Other. As a term, ‘world cinema’ presupposes a notion of the foreign, and, concurrently, a spirit of cosmopolitanism in the sense of feeling comfortable with cultural diversity. The recognition of shared human experiences that bind us informs this empathy towards the other. So it is that Wong—as a blonde-wigged and dissolute Petra von Kant—proclaims, “ich bin so im Arsch”, the character's bitterness and desperation echoing Wong's own sense of a mid-life and mid-career crisis⁵. So it is, too, that audiences who may initially be startled at the miscasting of Kluane Saunders as Mrs Su will nonetheless recognise the universal heart-rending experience of betrayal in love.

This shared emotion across boundaries of time, space and geography, between ‘strangers’ who look and speak differently from us, who uneasily inhabit roles we do not normally attribute to them, is an invitation to reconsider stereotypes and assumptions about others, and to imagine the self as the Other or the Other as the self. This, ultimately, is the affective power of Ming Wong's filmic works, especially urgent in a time when the walls of the world are closing in.

1 Tang Fu Kuen, “Notes From The Curator” in *Ming Wong: Life Of Imitation*, exhibition catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum, 22 April – 22 August 2010. Singapore Art Museum: Singapore, pg. 51.

2 English has been adopted as the lingua franca; Mandarin as a ‘mother tongue’ for citizens of Chinese descent -- replacing other dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien -- along with Malay and Indian as other official ‘mother tongues’.

3 Russell Storer, “Repeat After Me” in *Ming Wong: Life Of Imitation*, op. cit, pg. 62.

4 Storer, *ibid*, pg. 61.

5 See artist's statement on http://www.mingwong.org/tag/pvk_sections

This text has been commissioned by the Samstag Museum of Art to accompany *Ming Wong: In Love for the Mood* at SASA Gallery, City West campus as part of the 2019 *Adelaide//International*.