Making *Tracey*: An interview with Shu Kei

Gary Bettinson

[Fig.1]

The tale of a transgender woman's path to self-acceptance, *Tracey* (2018) stands as one of the most poignant and provocative Hong Kong dramas of recent years. As detailed by writer-producer Shu Kei in the following interview, *Tracey* marks the auspicious debut of director Jun Li, showcases bravura turns by veteran players Philip Keung, Kara Hui, and Ben Yeung, spotlights a nascent generation of talented Chinese actors (including River Huang, Ng Siu-hin, and Jennifer Yu), and tackles marginalized subject matter in ways both unflinching and compassionate.

Signed by Shu Kei, Erica Li, and Jun Li, the *Tracey* screenplay centres on Tai-hung (Philip Keung), a middle-aged optometrist whose humdrum lifestyle masks a deep psychological schism (Figure 1). Tai-hung's existence radiates middle-class heteronormativity: married to an amateur Peking Opera actress, he is father to a teenage son and a pregnant daughter and spends his evenings dutifully walking the family's pet dog (Figure 2). Yet, outward appearances to the contrary, Tai-hung nurses a secret urge to become a woman and, in private, indulges this fantasy by dressing in women's clothing.

[Fig.2]

Soon the veneer of domestic harmony cracks apart. A family dispute erupts over the private activities of the housemaid. The wife grows doubtful of her husband's fidelity. The son considers studying abroad against his mother's wishes. The pregnant daughter contracts a venereal disease from her philandering spouse. The family dog falls ill. And Tai-hung's gender crisis proves impossible to suppress, shattering the family's tenuous stability forever.

This is the febrile terrain of Cantonese melodrama (*wenyi pian*), but the screenwriters deftly anchor the genre's *deus ex machinas* in psychological complexity and credible reality. Each protagonist is assigned a bundle of contradictory traits and a delicately modulated arc of change. The wife, Anne (Kara Hui), is prima facie an austere harridan, but gradually her sympathetic traits come to the fore. By the climax, the film has wrung considerable poignancy from the sadness of her plight, which stems from years of spousal discord and

neglect. Consider, too, the teenage son Vincent (Ng Siu-hin), whose yen for travel betrays a rebellious urge to defy his domineering mother. Prone to self-righteousness, he condemns Anne's outmoded attitudes as racist and takes pride in his own generation's tolerance of sexual difference. Yet when his father's transgender identity is exposed, so is Vincent's latent homophobia. Pledged to complex characterization, *Tracey*'s screenwriters subvert the stock types that populate traditional melodrama. As corollary, the film's gradual character arcs and revelations play games with our sympathies. *Tracey* may steer us toward a negative appraisal of Anne and Vincent, but slowly the narration lets us perceive the depths of their humanity. These characters may be bigoted and hypocritical, but they are also forgivably human.

The most precipitous arc of change, of course, is traced by Tai-hung – by the third act, he will have undergone gender affirmation surgery and begun living publicly as a woman named Tracey. Many films motivate character change by a single decisive cause, but *Tracey*'s writers understand that the radical shift in Tai-hung's mindset requires multiple catalysts. The first such trigger comes with the untimely death of Ching (Wong Yat-ho), Tai-hung's former classmate. This shattering event ignites the protagonist's boyhood memories of Ching, a dashing youth shown in a series of distributed flashbacks (Figure 3). Slowly the plunge into Tai-hung's reveries reveals an unspoken and unconsummated sexual attraction, even a romantic love, between the adolescent boys. Then there is Tai-hung's chance reunion with Brother Darling (Ben Yeung), a retired opera star specializing in female roles. Brother Darling briefly remerges in Tai-hung's life as both mentor and model, a dignified if somewhat tragic exemplar of gender nonconformity. ("I'm actually a woman born with a male body," the elder asserts in flashback.) A third catalyst springs from the arrival of Bond Tann (River Huang), Ching's young Singaporean widower. For much of the drama, Bond challenges Tai-hung to desert his closeted existence, undergo gender affirmation surgery, and live authentically as a transgender woman.

[Fig. 3]

These impetuses spur Tai-hung's public metamorphosis into Tracey, a steep trajectory traced across several dramatic set pieces. One early episode begins as Bond embarks on a bit of flagrant autoeroticism in a hotel room. Clad only in briefs, he vamps sexily to a diegetic tune cherished by his late husband. Director Li treats this display as an occasion for erotic objectification, the camera gliding from Bond's naked torso to his bare thigh like a sensual caress (Figure 4). But the steamy mood abruptly evaporates: Bond crumples into a fit of

anguish, so bereft is he at the loss of his beloved Ching. His violent sobs (and the familiar music) summon the attentions of Tai-hung, who, having harboured romantic love for Ching since boyhood, identifies directly with Bond's grief. In the hotel room, the pair unite in their heartache, and what began as an episode of artful eroticism morphs into a scene of soulful intimacy. Thereafter the scene wends through further dramatic shifts. A consoling gesture segues into an impromptu kiss, and a passionate clinch exposes Tai-hung's penchant for women's undergarments. Suddenly vulnerable, Tai-hung darts from the room, leaving Bond alone in confusion and sorrow.

[Fig. 4]

This pivotal scene hooks into a later one. Tai-hung escorts Bond to a remote lake, a rock-encrusted idyll in which he and Ching, along with classmate Jun (Sham Ka-ki), often capered as youths. The scene unfolds as both confrontation and confessional: Tai-hung admits that Ching was "probably the man I loved most in my life," and declares, "I'm a woman…deep inside." Bond fastens on Tai-hung's armature of victimhood – "Stop thinking yourself a tragic hero" – before urging him to assert agency by openly adopting a female identity. This scene prepares the way for a still later set piece in Tai-hung's family apartment. Here the protagonist, adorned in female drag, comes out to Anne as transgender, a revelation that sparks a volcanic showdown. Ferociously protective of both her brittle marriage and her public "face," Anne would rather a life of duplicity and self-denial than acknowledge her husband's hidden identity. Ever intractable, she refuses Tai-hung a divorce. This combustive scene, at once claustrophobic and operatic, uncharacteristically embraces the histrionics of classic melodrama – though not at the expense of emotional truth. Its high pitch of intensity is necessary to justify the ensuing scene in which Tai-hung – emotionally spent and pushed to self-harm – takes drastic measures to actuate his female self.

In all, the makers of *Tracey* have carpentered a drama rich in psychological nuance and emotional resonance. Ostensibly a social-message film, *Tracey* is assimilable to a growing tide of recent Hong Kong movies treating progressive subject matter, from 2016's *Mad World* (mental illness) and 2018's *Still Human* (disability) to 2022's *The Sunny Side of the Street* (ethnic minorities) and Jun Li's 2021 sophomore feature, *Drifting* (vagrancy). Still, *Tracey* does not attempt to proselytize or wheedle the viewer – the film gains its potency by aligning and allying us with realistically imperfect characters trying to forge connections, seek out inner truths, or simply just hold things together. It extends a proud tradition of gay

filmmaking in the region that runs the gamut from arthouse works (e.g. Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* [1997]) and mid-budget mainstream ventures (e.g. Ray Yeung's *Suk Suk* [2019]) to fantasy-fuelled erotica (e.g. *Utopians* [2015] and similar works signed by Scud). Not least, *Tracey* dovetails with Ann Hui's short film *My Way* (2012) and Maisy Goosy Suen's *A Woman Is a Woman* (2018) as trailblazing Hong Kong explorations of the transgender experience.

[Fig. 5]

No-one is better placed to narrate the making of *Tracey* than Shu Kei (Figure 5). In his dual role of writer-producer, he was integrally involved in every aspect of the production, herding the project from inception to theatrical release and promotion. Born in 1956 in Hong Kong, Shu Kei has since the 1980s been a major player in Chinese-language cinema. At various times a film critic, publicist, novelist, editor, distributor, festival programmer, and educator, he found notable success as a producer (e.g. *Beijing Bastards*, 1993; *Ashes of Time*, 1994), screenwriter (e.g. *Temptress Moon*, 1996), and director (e.g. *Sunless Days*, 1990). His directorial works *A Queer Story* (1997) and *Hu-Du-Men* (1996) made noteworthy contributions to Hong Kong's gay and lesbian cinema; as distributor, he shepherded Chen Kaige's gay-themed historical epic *Farewell, My Concubine* (1993) to Western attention. Founding editor of *Film Biweekly* magazine (latterly titled *City Entertainment*) and former Dean of the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, Shu Kei has vigorously stimulated film culture within the territory and remains a tireless supporter of Hong Kong cinema.

In the following interview, he charts *Tracey*'s evolution from story concept and script construction through shooting, postproduction editing, and theatrical release. The interview was conducted in English on 21 March 2024, in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong.

***

Gary Bettinson: What was the genesis of *Tracey*?

Shu Kei: In 2015 or 2016, I attended a gathering comprised mostly of people from Johnnie To's Milkyway Image company. I met Louis Koo there; I had known him before, of course. After dinner, he asked me if I could plan a number of local Hong Kong productions for him.

He said he had some finance and he wanted to make more Hong Kong films. He told me that the projects need not be very commercial – each production would be between low-to-medium budget, so even if the films made a loss at the box-office, it wouldn't be disastrous. Of course, I gladly accepted his invitation. And then I contacted a scriptwriter named Erica Li, and we got together and devised some ideas. One of the ideas was about a group of five men around the age of fifty. Each man has his own storyline. One of the stories was kind of a comedy: it concerned a boyhood friend of mine from secondary school with whom I still keep in contact. He turned out to be gay but none of us knew – he hadn't come out to anyone, not even to his wife or his kids. But when he was approaching sixty, he decided that it was time to come out in order to be fair to everyone in his family and also to his long-time boyfriend. At a reunion gathering, he came out to everyone, and everyone was so shocked. I proposed this idea to Erica, and we developed it into one of the plotlines. But later we had second thoughts: we felt this was actually not a very good concept since there are tons of coming-out films and this type of story is not new anymore; it is no longer very dramatic. Suddenly a thought hit me: what if this male character is transgender? Then things become more complicated because of the fact that he must undergo a life-altering surgery, and transitioning takes much more time and much more pain than simply coming out as gay. What if he were professionally successful, has kids, has an apparently happy family – if he has all these things, what exactly does he want? He has maybe twenty more years to live. Why does he want to go through with the operation? I thought this premise was very dramatic. So we put this idea into a script treatment, along with the plotlines of four other characters, and then sent it to Louis Koo.

Scriptwriting practices in Hong Kong have changed since the early 2000s. How detailed did the initial story treatment need to be?

It was not very detailed. It ran for three or four pages and outlined each of the five plotlines. Even before we had a full synopsis or a scene-by-scene breakdown, we needed to decide on the main cast. We wrote in the treatment that we would like very much for Lau Ching-wan to play the role of Tai-hung/Tracey. We particularly wanted Lau because we felt that with his look and physique, the dramatic situation becomes more awkward, because you never could have imagined that he could be a woman. And of course, for the main character this overt masculine appearance is a very good façade for him to hide his sexual identity. Anyway, I sent the treatment to Louis Koo. When Louis received the treatment, he was actually shooting with Lau Ching-wan on another film. He immediately asked Lau if he was interested and Lau

said, “Yes, I think it is a very interesting idea.” But the only problem for Lau was that the transgender storyline was only one-fifth of the whole film. He said, “I’m interested in doing it, but not as one-fifth of a story. I think this transgender storyline could be developed into a whole feature film.” And I said, “Well, fine – I think we have enough elements and materials to expand the premise.” We had several meetings, and then one day Louis told me that, after much thought, Lau had decided not to accept the role. I also had a chance to talk with Lau. He told me: “I spent a long time considering it. I couldn’t believe that I could have been a woman. If I cannot convince myself, there is no way I can do the film.” So now we needed to look for another actor. Louis suggested Philip Keung Ho-man. I met him. He had the same very dark skin and very manly physique as Lau Ching-wan, so this was good. Although Philip had been doing mostly supporting roles in films, the audience always seems to like him, and I always thought that he should be a male lead one day.

You could afford to take a commercial risk by casting Philip Keung because the film was an inexpensive production?

Yes. Since Louis Koo had already promised us that we need not make a purely mainstream commercial film, we were very free to do anything.

What production budget were you granted?

We agreed on something around US $1 million.

You had devised a plot treatment and begun casting the main roles. Did you then compose a full-fledged preproduction screenplay?

Yes. Erica and I went on to write a longer treatment, then a scene-by-scene breakdown, and then the first draft of the script. Erica finished the first draft. But honestly this draft was not very ideal. Erica was very busy at that time. When she finished the first draft, she had already completed three or four other scripts. The first draft took a long time to finish, almost a year-and-a half. And I was busy working as Dean of the Academy of Performing Arts at the time. By the time Erica finished the first draft, we all agreed that the script was not very ideal. Erica herself later admitted that.

What aspects of her script did not satisfy you?

Being a straight woman, a mother of two girls, a middle-class housewife, and a very successful scriptwriter, Erica had been enjoying all the successes she deserved. The LGBTQ

world was not exactly alien to her, but she was not familiar with many aspects of that world. Despite the research we both did, her lack of familiarity with the queer world was manifested in the script. And so I started rewriting it. At this time, we still hadn't committed to any director. The deal between me and Louis Koo was that we should use new directors to direct these productions. We approached several young directors, but all of them rejected the project for different reasons. Some were not very interested in the story or the subject matter; some thought that the subject matter was too remote for them. Eventually, we chose to hire a director named Kit Hung. He had directed two feature films before, and at that time he was teaching at Hong Kong Baptist University. He was very happy to do the film because he thought he could finish it during the summer before going to Britain to further his studies. But unfortunately, there was some delay with the production. Kit, Erica, and I had a meeting, and finally Erica decided not to write any further drafts. She said, "Maybe I can't understand the world of transgenders." Of course, she had other commitments as well, so I continued revising the script with Kit. But after the delay, Kit said, "I really cannot wait because I cannot delay my doctoral studies." So sadly, he also withdrew from the project.

How did you come to hire Jun Li as director?

We settled on Jun Li because he had just won the Best Director award at the Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival. I thought his film, *Liu Yang He* (2017), was quite nice. Jun had never directed any dramatic films before this, and I thought *Liu Yang He* was good enough. Also, he had studied a course on gender and politics at, I think, Oxford University, as part of his master's degree. He had also come out openly as gay. So I thought he was the perfect choice. After Jun came onboard, I agreed that he – being the director – could make some revisions to the script. By this stage, I had already been doing all the preproduction and casting the main actors, so I told him, "You can't change the story, you can't change the characters. You may change some scenes, you may add some new characters if you need to, but you can't change the essential story." He did make some changes, modifying some of the characters. For example, he raised the age of Tai-hung's son.

The son was a pre-adolescent in the early drafts?

Yes. Jun changed him into a teenager. I think he found some similarity or identification with that character, so he made the son a little bit younger than him. This was okay, because when Jun came onboard we hadn't yet cast an actor to play the son. Anyway, I kept writing the final draft of the script…

By yourself?

Yes, by myself. Jun changed no more than twenty percent of my script – only very minor changes – before shooting began.

In total, how much time was spent on preproduction scripting?

It took almost two years, mainly because Erica and I had been working on it part-time.

Did the script then need to be approved by Louis Koo?

Yes. It was very easy. It passed every draft.

As a screenwriter, do you consciously follow principles such as the three-act structure and character arcs? Or is your writing process more intuitive?

I never studied at film school. I started as a writer for a TV series, working under directors such as Patrick Tam, Yim Ho, and Ann Hui. Although I had heard of the three-act structure, I never found out exactly what it was! My writing process is not exactly intuitive because I studied English drama in my university days. I was quite heavily influenced by the plays of Harold Pinter. Studying Pinter's dialogue and characterization was very useful to me. Especially useful was the way he used silence and pauses – this was the first lesson our teacher taught us. I also studied, on this Literature and Drama course, the Angry Young Men generation – playwrights like John Osborne and also the film adaptations of those plays, directed by Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger, and others. Later, I continued learning about scriptwriting from people I worked with in TV and film. When I started to write my own script, I just had a sense of how it should be structured and how I should design the characters, but I never followed some of those rigid rules or guidelines.

In Hong Kong, storyboards are not typically employed for dramas. But since Jun Li was a novice director, was it necessary to plot out the shots in advance?

No. I don't think he knew how to do it. For me, I don't believe in storyboards.

Why not?

I think that storyboards are only important for action and CG. My first job as a scriptwriter was with Patrick Tam. It was a one-hour episode of a TV series called *Social Worker* (1977). Patrick didn't use storyboards. He would design his shots by just writing on the script. He would break down the dialogue into sets of lines, so that one set of lines belonged to one shot,

the next set of lines belonged to the next shot, and so on, and he'd just write "medium shot" and "close-up" alongside each set of lines. For me, this method is much better than a storyboard. Later, I learned more about shot design from watching the films of the Japanese director, Mikio Naruse. I first looked at his films in the mid-1980s when the Hong Kong International Film Festival held a retrospective of his films. I was very friendly with Edward Yang at that time. Together we went to almost all the screenings in the retrospective. This was also the first time that Edward had seen Naruse's films. We both had the same reaction every time we walked out of the cinema: we would look at each other and say, "Wow – another masterpiece." I was so fond of Naruse's films. I knew they were so well directed, but I couldn't figure out why they were so perfect. Shot-wise, there was no fancy directing. It was not like Mizoguchi with his long takes, or Ozu who is very stylized. It wasn't like Bertolucci or any of the masters I had known. More than ten years later, when I became a teacher, I started to rewatch Naruse's films. And finally, I said: "Wow – I know now how he directed the film. I finally understand Naruse." The magic is actually very simple. As a director, with each scene you must know very clearly what you want to deliver and how to make the audience know what you want to deliver. You must know which characters you want the audience to identify with. You must know how the audience should look at the scene and receive the information that you want to tell them. You have to decide on all of that. And then you must know your location – the set. Why have you chosen this set? How will you move your actors within this set in a way that appears natural? Why does the character have to stand up suddenly and move from here to there? Why do they have to sit down? Why do they have to look at each other? Or not face each other? So, the first thing is to understand the characters, their personalities, their every single habit. You need to understand the situation, the relationships, and the kind of emotion that you want to build up within the scene. You must have a very clear understanding of all these things *before* you decide your shots. Your shots are the *way* to convey all this information, to generate all these impressions among the audience. I try to make my filmmaking students understand this. Mostly because they are young, student filmmakers just want to impress the audience, so they will always think of the shots first: "This is going to be a long take, this is going to be a quick cut, this is going to be a fancy tracking shot." No – there's no need for you to think of the shots before you have a clear understanding of what the scene is about. Only then can you start to think: What kind of setup or shot scale or camera movement will deliver this dramatic information in the best way? This is a very difficult thing to do, I would say. But as a director, you have to prepare all this completely before you can start thinking about the particular shots.

So, without the proper preparation storyboards are superfluous.

Exactly. Storyboards are about the shot scale and the movement of the camera. They're not about the dramatic contents of the scene.

Once shooting of *Tracey* was underway, you were a frequent presence on the set. As a producer, did you think it necessary to provide support and advice to Jun Li, being a first-time director?

Yes. Jun was a totally new director. With new directors, the thing they find most difficult is to direct the actors, especially professional actors who are so experienced and so famous. Some of the big stars have their own temperament, whereas a new director doesn't have any confidence at all. This was not exactly the case with *Tracey*, but still I think there was this feeling with Jun. And so I felt that my presence on set might help things go smoothly. Also, I could offer help. Because *Tracey* was a low-budget film and we had lots of locations and characters, the only way to make the film within the budget was to shoot it within as few days as possible. We aimed to squeeze the whole shooting period into one month. In fact, it took us nineteen days to shoot the film. We were scouting the locations as the shooting went along, so it was a very rushed production. With such a rushed schedule, we didn't have enough time to shoot some of the scripted scenes, and sometimes we had to squeeze the shooting of a scene. We abandoned a few scenes during the shooting because of the time limit.

Were there any scenes in particular that you were sorry to lose?

If we had to lose something, it meant that those scenes were expendable. That's how you learn when you are shooting. Of course, when you are writing the script, you think every scene is essential. But when you look at the acting and how the actors react with each other, you realize that you can abandon some of the scenes. One more thing: by squeezing the shoot into a month, we could sign most of the crew members to a one-month contract, which saved us a lot of money. Some of the key crew members – for example, the art director, the assistant director, and the cameraman – came onboard a couple of weeks earlier. It was very intense. This is the way we did most of these productions with the new directors.

[Fig. 6]

What challenges did the shooting phase present?

There is a scene in which Tai-hung brings Bond (River Huang), the young guy from Singapore, to the lake where Tai-hung and his two best friends used to play together during their high-school years. When it came to filming this scene, Jun Li had to excuse himself because he had to go to an interview with the government for the sponsorship of his next film. This was during the middle of the shoot. He left before noon, so I had to take over the shooting of this scene (Figure 6). Of course, I had no storyboard. I didn't know how to shoot the scene. But I knew I had two very good actors at that point. I was working against a time limit – there was no way we could carry on shooting after six o'clock in the evening because the sunset would arrive, and we were shooting deep down in the valley. It was a very difficult location. We had to climb down and then climb up a very narrow path, and it was very difficult to climb, especially at my age! We were all very anxious. Before leaving, Jun let me know roughly how he would like the scene to be played, which I kind of disagreed with. He wanted to not make it too dramatic. But I believed this was one of the most dramatic scenes in the film. It depicts a confrontation. So, when I took over the directing that day, I immediately changed it and gave a new set of directions to the actors. And then, inside my mind, I started to break the scene down into different shots. I conceived a shot where the two men are directly facing each other, and I positioned them very close together (Figure 7). In real life, people don't face each other like that. The actors were almost kissing each other! Even the actors were in doubt about my staging of the shot. "Why are we so close together? We are almost kissing each other." I said, "No, don't worry about that – on screen, it won't look so unnatural." I wanted to stage it in a way that is a real confrontation. All that concerns me is how these characters start from an ordinary conversation that escalates into a conflict. Tai-hung knows there is no way of denying his true identity anymore, but he still doesn't want to admit it. At the same time, Bond wants to find out the true nature of Tai-hung's relationship with his deceased husband Ching. I had to find a way to make all the dialogue and emotions build up to a climax across the course of the scene to the point that there is really no escape for Tai-hung. So this is the way I tried to direct the scene, by orchestrating the characters' physical movement and, after that, designing the scale and composition of the shot.

[Fig. 7]

This is an example of your storyboard philosophy in practice.

Right. The idea actually came from the second film I directed, *Soul* (1986). I was very green at that time. The cinematographer was Christopher Doyle. Deannie Ip plays the wife of a corrupt cop who commits suicide. The wife is left with nothing, and then she finds out that her husband was disloyal to her all the time. The husband and his mistress had a kid together, but the wife is completely ignorant of that. Then the mistress is killed. The wife goes into the mistress's house and finds all these photographs on the shelves showing the husband with his mistress and their kid. She is totally shocked. There was a shot in which she looks closely at those photographs. When Doyle set up the camera, he kept asking Deannie to get closer and closer to the photographs. I said, "Come on, she's kissing the photographs." Because we didn't have any video assist at that time, Doyle said to me, "Come and look through the viewfinder, and you will understand." I looked through the viewfinder and I saw that the effect was good. It looked very dramatic.

There is a scene in *Tracey* in which the protagonist and his wife Anne, played by Kara Hui, have an impassioned argument. You mentioned earlier that you design shots in such a way as to direct the viewer's sympathies to particular characters. Did you ever worry that Anne or the teenage son Vincent would become unsympathetic to the audience, since initially both characters react negatively to Tai-hung's "coming out"? Was this a concern when you were writing the screenplay?

For me, the whole process of scriptwriting means that you have to be a split personality, because for each character you must know him or her very well. The lines of dialogue are the reactions of each character against the others, so you must know why they speak as they do. Why does this character have to react and speak such lines at that point? Surely, sometimes you will think, "That character is very unsympathetic" or "He's very annoying," but you have to ask further: Why? Is he really a character who is very annoying or is it just that *at that point* he is reacting in such a way because it is natural for him? Perhaps it is simply within his personality and characterization to react in such a way at that moment. That's the way I compose my characters.

[Fig.8]

This confrontation scene between Anne and Tai-hung provides a virtuosic showcase for Kara Hui and Philip Keung. Since you were shooting within such a restricted schedule, was there any opportunity to rehearse the scene?

This is a very interesting scene (Figure 8). When we approached Kara Hui to play the wife, we gave her the script. She was very nice, and she accepted it unconditionally – almost. We had a meeting between the three of us – me, Jun Li, and her – and we went through the script together. Kara said about this scene specifically: "The way you have written it is too mild. It is not dramatic enough." Of course, we knew that Kara has had a long career, starting with Shaw Brothers in the 1970s and later at TVB, and we realized that the kind of drama she was talking about might not be exactly the thing that we want. So we were a little bit apprehensive. But I took her advice. I looked at the scene again and thought: Maybe it can be a little bit more dramatic. So I rewrote the scene and then sent it to her. No reaction – she didn't comment, nothing at all. I thought, "Well, maybe the rewritten scene is good enough." The first location we shot at was the main characters' apartment. We filmed there for four days. Of course, we put that confrontation scene at the last day of shooting in the apartment location, but still it was very early in the shooting schedule to shoot such a dramatic scene. Jun said, "I need two cameras for this scene in order to cover everything." But I didn't think it would work because the dining room was very small. Of course, we must shoot it with handheld cameras, but even with two cameras there is the camera crew, the focus puller – at minimum, you would have four crew members, plus the two actors. Six people in that small area. Of course, the camera must try not to film the other camera. And everything is moving – the action is a dynamic argument between the spouses. Also, because it's a very emotional scene, the actors may not be able to do many takes. I was very sure that there was no room for a second camera, but it was better not to say "No" to Jun as it was only the fourth day of shooting. Anyway, an hour before we came to shoot that scene, I went to see Kara. She was laying on a bed in another room. I asked her, "Kara, what do you think of the way the scene is rewritten? You have to tell me." And she said, "Well, I'm thinking about it." I said, "Was it good enough?" She said: "I remember I once had a girl friend who also was in a similar kind of situation as my character in the film. Her husband decided to divorce her when she was sixty years old, and she went into complete madness." And she started to act it out. I said, "No, don't act out – I want you to save your emotions for the shooting." She said, "Don't worry, I will talk with [Philip] Keung Ho-man – we will work out the scene together." I said, "Fine." Of course, we knew that the scene was going to be shot handheld and most probably in a continuous take because the feelings are strong and, again, Philip and Kara cannot perform the scene many times. So I talked with Jun. And again, there was no way for us to plan the shots because the shooting of the scene depends on the actors and what they do. I told Jun: "Look, this is the way to do it: we will ask the actors to come down to the set. We'll

let them perform the scene, to serve as a kind of rehearsal, but they don't need to perform it with full emotions. And then we will know the way they walk, the way they move around. And we will look at their performance and then think about the shots." And this is what we did. The actors rehearsed on set and moved all over the place. Immediately, looking at the way they did the scene, I knew how the scene could be filmed in stages, with three different camera setups. And we'd cover the actors with two to four takes – some closer shots, some wider shots. This was the best way to do it, a very good collaborative way. So I told Jun, "This is the way you should do it." And the cameraman said, "Yes, of course, we can do it like that." Then I asked Jun [rhetorically]: "Where do you want to put the second camera?" Because, once you do it this way, there's no point in having a second camera. But he still insisted on using two cameras: "Let's rehearse one more time with the two cameras." So I said, "Sure, let's do it again." We walked through the scene and the cameras crashed into each other! I said, "See?" Jun was young, very insistent, and insecure. I said, "Sorry, but at this point I have to exercise my authority as a producer – there is really no need for two cameras." Even the cameraman agreed. So we discarded the second camera. I said to Jun, "Don't worry – go upstairs and look at the video assist, and whenever you find something wrong, just yell at us – I will be here on set directing the actors." So, this was the way it was done. The actors were very good of course. We did about two or three takes and added some insert shots. Then we had a scene.

You mentioned that Kara Hui came onboard from the moment she read the script. In the case of Philip Keung and perhaps especially River Huang, a teen idol with a largely female fan base, was it hard to convince them to play, respectively, a transgender and a gay character?

No, not at all. We were very lucky because River is from Taiwan. He was discovered by a very close director friend of mine named Yee Chih-yen, who directed the famous film *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002) in Taiwan. He discovered River in a TV series that he directed when River was fourteen or fifteen years old. I noticed River at that time. But of course, when I met him for *Tracey* he was older. He had done several films and he had also been abroad to study during the few years between Yee Chih-yen's TV series and *Tracey*. I immediately knew that I wanted him, because I like his long hair. His long hair doesn't make him look feminine but rather very sensitive. Therefore, when Erica Li and I talked about casting the role we already had River in mind – this is why we wrote the character as someone who comes from

Singapore. We didn't want him to be from Taiwan – it's too close. Anyway, I went to Taiwan and asked to meet River, and his manager was very encouraging.

He didn't have any concerns about River's image?

No, no. Actually, Taiwan is very free about homosexuality.

And how do actors in Hong Kong regard gay roles these days?

There is very little resistance now in Hong Kong for actors to play these roles. Anyway, one interesting thing happened: We had a delay of about half a year or so before shooting. And River said, "Well, in that case, I want to go to London to do an English-speaking course for three or four months." I said, "Fine, no problem." Actually, this was just his excuse, because his girlfriend was also in London and therefore he wanted to fly over there to be with her. Anyway, we started shooting. The plan was this: after we finished shooting the apartment scene between Kara and Philip, River was to come to Hong Kong, prepare for two days, and then start the shoot. But the last day we were in that apartment, we received a call from his manager. He said that River was back in Taiwan. Something had happened, but we didn't know what. Apparently, he had a break-up with his girlfriend in London, and his girlfriend went to Russia. It was a huge blow for him. Immediately, his manager called me up and told me that River wanted to quit films. He couldn't do any more films – he was in emotional trauma. And then he started not receiving my calls. I immediately called Yee Chih-yen, the director, because he was some kind mentor to River. He also couldn't locate River. He said, "I feel a responsibility to tell you – maybe he won't be coming to Hong Kong to make your film after all." We thought, "My God." River's manager started recommending other actors in his company to replace River. I said, "No, no, I don't want the others. I'll wait." The next morning, Yee Chih-yen called me and said, "We finally found him. I had a long talk with him. He's emotionally very unstable. I finally convinced him to go to Hong Kong, but he's not sure about it. We don't know how well he may perform for you." River came to Hong Kong. The first day we found him a little bit unsteady, but still he was okay. Of course, we had to pretend that we didn't know anything about his romantic heartbreak. Because he had to dance in one scene in the film, we lined him up with a choreographer and they started rehearsing together. He was very good actually. When we shot the scene in which he dances, and also the scene in which he confronts Tai-hung, we were a little bit apprehensive deep inside, because we didn't know whether the emotion generated by these scenes would affect him or not. In the confrontation scene, there was a very intimate conversation between him and

Philip's character. After that scene, River actually broke down and went into another room and cried for a long time. Anyway, he was very, very good in the film.

[Fig. 9]

Another important performance in *Tracey* is that of Ng Siu-hin as Tai-hung's son Vincent (Figure 9).

Ng Siu-hin's performance was definitely very okay. He is hardworking enough to put the best of his efforts into the film, but as a budding young actor I think he lacked discipline at that time. He was still too young and very excited about his start in the film industry. Everything was so smooth for him. He was not exactly arrogant or proud, but I don't think he took his acting career very seriously. Also, being an actor well-trained in in the Academy of Performing Arts, I think he was very self-satisfied. He thought he was superior to the other young actors because of his orthodox training background. I think this became an obstacle for him. This is something which, rather surprisingly, was unanimously agreed upon by people in the industry, particularly among producers and directors. I think that is the main reason for him being not exactly welcomed by the other filmmakers in Hong Kong, and he did not have further development in terms of his acting career after *Tracey*.

***Tracey* opens with a subjective voiceover narration, but this device does not appear elsewhere in the film. Was the voiceover written into the original script or added later in postproduction? Did you purposely try to minimise the use of voiceover?**

The voiceover was decided upon only at the editing stage. Originally the script started just with the overseas phone call from Bond informing Tai-hung of Ching's death. There was no flashback in the original version of this scene. But later we filmed the flashback, which we felt was a more appropriate opening. To complement the flashback we needed the voiceover, which was added later during the editing process.

The shooting schedule was squeezed. Was postproduction similarly pressurised?

We took a long time doing postproduction. The editor we used, Li Ko, is a former student of mine. At that time, he was working at RTHK, the government broadcasting network. Accordingly, he could not work outside RTHK. But I liked him very much. *Tracey* was the first feature film that he edited. He could work only after hours, so he took a long time to edit

the film – more than six months. I showed each cut of the film to my circle of friends whom I trust, seeking their opinions and suggestions for improvements.

When the film was completed and submitted to the local censoring authority, were you required to make any cuts?

No.

***Tracey* received nine nominations at the Hong Kong Film Awards. This must have been gratifying for all of you involved in the film.**

[Tentatively:] Yeah.

Does awards recognition mean anything to you? Or not so much?

Not so much. For many years I had been to festivals doing distribution and publicity, so I'm numb to festivals nowadays. I'm very indifferent to them.

Awards recognition brings a wider audience to the film.

Sure.

Is this the main benefit of awards attention?

No, I think that – especially nowadays in the internet age – awards are quite bad, especially for new directors. It was different in the last century, up to the 1990s. Just imagine Truffaut, Godard, even Antonioni – when they won an award at the Cannes Film Festival, of course it was a great honour, of course they must have been very happy. In terms of news coverage, the Cannes Film Festival was reported mainly in France, and maybe in some of the other countries in Europe. And that's all. Truffaut didn't know how the news of his success at Cannes was received outside of Europe, for example, in Asia. There was mainly print media before the internet age. So I think that those directors wouldn't become egoistic and pompous and hubristic by winning an award in those days. After a couple of months, they would start to make their next films and they wouldn't be thinking, "I have to be successful again at Cannes." But nowadays directors, even when they start making their first film, will be dreaming of winning awards at all these festivals. They will be dreaming of going up onto the stage to receive the award. And they will be dreaming that when they Google their names, there will be a million items mentioning their name. That's why I think awards are really very bad nowadays. It is all vanity.

[Fig. 10]

On reflection, what is your overall view of *Tracey*? Are you satisfied with the film?

Honestly speaking, I am okay with the film. I think it's watchable. I think it is better than average. I also think that we have indeed tried our best. Of course, if we had a little bit more budget and if we could shoot a few more days, things would have been improved. Because of the very, very rushed schedule, there are at least a couple of scenes that were not very well shot, and we had to delete them – not because of length but because of the unsatisfactory result. But all in all, I think the film is okay. Well, very honestly, I do think that Philip Keung Ho-man's performance could have been much improved, but I think that is due to the very bad habits of most Hong Kong young actors, especially actors in much demand. At that time Philip was very much in demand – not as a main actor but as a supporting actor. He could only give us two more weeks in addition to the one month shoot to do the film. We arranged some classes for him which concentrated on physical acting, to help him perform as a female – the way he has to walk, the way he has to move his body, and things like that. But sadly, there was just not enough time. He attended a couple of classes and went on to do his own practice, but I would say that was simply not enough. Of course, he trusted us, and we tried our best to direct him, but that is the best we all could do.

Do you think that *Tracey* had an impact on Hong Kong cinema?

After *Tracey*, I would say that around ninety-eight percent of the new directors' films take as their subject matter some kind of social-issue concern. There seems to be an agenda, a social agenda, for almost every film. I think this puts Hong Kong cinema on a wrong track. But in a way, it's excusable because the new directors have no money and they want to generate attention. But even when we were doing *Tracey*, I think that in the back of Louis Koo's mind and that of our executive producer, there was this same kind of feeling. The executive producer once said to me, "We have to be very careful because we are speaking for the transgender community. We are giving them a voice in our film." I said, "No, no. This is not the reason I want to do the film. The reason I want to do the film is simply because I find the subject interesting and dramatic enough to become a film." I think that it's a huge decision for the character Tai-hung to become a woman, and the interesting challenge of the film is: how can we convince the audience that Tai-hung had to conceal or deny his identity for such a long time? Why – aside from the social pressure – didn't he transition much earlier? From a

certain perspective, it's really pointless to live the last twenty years of your life as a [transgender] female, and it's awfully difficult for you because you may lose all your friends. There's still a lot of problems concerning your physical condition and health. We did quite a lot of research. From our research we learned that, for a transgender person, she or he will likely have a much shorter life. Many of them will die in their fifties because they have gone through a huge operation on their body. Some parts of their body will not function regularly anymore. Even after surgery, they still must keep going to the doctor and have regular examinations. So if you are fifty years old and you still choose to go through all that, there must be a very strong reason for you to do it. If we want the audience to be sympathetic with Tai-hung, we have to make sure that we convince them of Tai-hung's motivation and circumstances. So this, for me, was the reason to do the film, because it's a drama. Not a social-message film. I said, "I can't claim to understand the psychology of a transgender person." Well, maybe I can understand a transgender person better than a lot of people, but in terms of the pain and suffering that he or she has to go through, I cannot say I am completely in accordance with them.

How was the film received by transgender people?

The happiest thing about *Tracey* is that, after finishing the film, we invited all our transgender interviewees to watch it, and every single one of them was very happy. They said, "This is the way it is."