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KING OF MASKS 变脸

Bian lian (Changing faces)

Wu Tianming 吴天明, Shaw Brothers, 1996.

101 min.

From the story by Chen Wengui 陈文贵
(aka Chan Man-kwai), 1996.

Stars **Zhu Xu 朱旭**



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Best Director (Ale Kino International young Audience FF; Istanbul IFF); **Best Actor**, Grand Jury Prize (Jury Award, Beijing Student FF); **Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Film** (Carrousel International du Film); **Best Actor** (Fajr FF); **Best Co-produced Feature, Best Director** (Golden Rooster); **Outstanding Co-production** (Huabiao Film Awards); **Best Children's Film** (IFF for Children and Young People; Wurzburg IFF); **Best Foreign Language Film** (Palm Springs IFF); **Best Asian Director** (Singapore IFF); **Best Actor, Best Director** (Tokyo IFF)

Setting

The film is set in the 1930s in Leshan 乐山, Sichuan 四川 Province, site of the largest stone Buddha in the world. The Grand Buddha (大佛 *Dàfú*) was carved into the side of a cliff at the confluence of three rivers in the year 713 (Tang Dynasty) to protect boatmen from treacherous river currents. He is as tall as a 25 story building (230 feet / 71 meters), his ears 26 feet (7 meters) long, and his big toe 28-feet (8.5 meters). Knowing something of the history of this statue is important to appreciating the structure of the film narrative.

The carving of the sculpture was conceived nearly 1300 years ago by a monk who tirelessly solicited monies for the project. When a corrupt official stole the funds the monk made a desperate attempt to save the monies: he publicly blinded himself in order to shame the official into returning the money. The monk died soon after – but the Buddha was carved. This history of the Buddha at Leshan is as familiar to Chinese audiences as Mount Rushmore or George Washington's cherry tree are to Americans.

In the film, Buddhist themes are articulated through various forms of the Bodhisattva¹ Guanyin 观音 (Goddess of Mercy) -- the most ubiquitous and popular Buddhist figure throughout Asia. Although male in India, Guanyin takes a female form in Chinese Buddhism – and hence embodies an essential gender ambiguity. In the film, a popular opera star – a male actor who plays female roles – is widely regarded by the masses as a living incarnation of Guanyin.

Narrative

An aging street performer (**the 'King'**) has perfected the art of changing face masks faster than the eye can see (this magical skill is still practiced today in the teahouses of Sichuan Province). The secrets of his art should be passed only from father to son -- if passed to a daughter, the knowledge could be 'stolen' by another family when the daughter marries and goes to live with her husband's family. But the King is childless; unless he can acquire a son, his skill will not survive beyond his lifetime.

Buddhist themes are established early in the film, when the King buys a glitzy Guanyin statuette whose powers promise to bring him a son. Soon after he encounters a man on the street who is offering his 7-year old son for sale (not uncommon in the 30s when many families were starving). The King buys the child to be his adopted

¹ *Bodhisattava*: a Buddhist ideal: a human being who reaches the threshold of full enlightenment (Nirvana) and release from the endless chain of cause and effect, birth and rebirth (*karma*), but who selflessly turns away from this opportunity for personal salvation and instead returns to Earth, dedicated to performing unselfish deeds that will release others from the cycle of suffering. A bodhisattva is an exemplar of compassion and altruism. Guanyin, the personification of heavenly compassion, appears everywhere in China (and throughout Asia): in tourist sites and shrines, in posters, figurines, and product packaging (e.g., Fujian famous Guanyin Tea).¹

son, and soon after takes **Gouwa** (lit. baby dog) to visit the Grand Buddha where the child scampers over the statue's gigantic toes.

But “Doggie” turns out to be a girl, and the King rejects her. Nonetheless, motivated by her Buddha-nature of pure and selfless love, Guowa seizes upon various possibilities for bringing to the King the son he so desperately desires. In so doing she brings upon them both a series of near-fatal calamities.

At the darkest moment, **Master Liang**, a female impersonator—an opera star regarded by the masses as a living incarnation of the Bodhisattva Guanyin—saves the day by publicly shaming a regional official, thus re-enacting, in a way, the shaming of the official 1300 years earlier by the monk who blinded himself in order to save the funding for the carving of the Buddha.

Director Wu Tianming 吴天明 (b. 1939 Sanyuan 三原, Shaanxi 陕西 Province; d. 2014, Beijing 北京)

Wu, a Fourth Generation filmmaker, originally studied acting in the 1960s. During the last three years of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命 *Wénhuà Dàgémìng* 1966-76) he majored in directing at Beijing Film Academy 北京电影学院 where he was trained in Soviet-style social realism in which the unpleasant realities and heroics of common life are shown in service to social justice. In 1984 Wu was appointed director of Xi'an Film Studios, where he became a much respected mentor of the younger Fifth Generation filmmakers, many of whom have gone on to achieve international reputations. In 1989 Wu was a visiting scholar at New York University (NYU), but after June 4 decided to remain in the US. He returned to China in 1994 to direct *King of Masks*. Like Alfred Hitchcock, Wu would give himself a small speaking cameo in all of his films.

Themes / motifs

The **interplay between outward, superficial appearances and true inner essence** is the overarching Buddhist theme in *King of Masks* – things are not what they appear to be. This is signaled by the Chinese title of the film *Bian Lian* (lit. changing faces, i.e., changing *appearances*)². The **theme of illusion versus reality** is articulated throughout the film in a number of forms, of which the King's sleight-of-hand mask-changing is only the most obvious. The male actor, Master Liang presents several layers of gender ambiguity. Although he is widely regarded by the populace as a living incarnation of the female Bodhisattva Guanyin, Master Liang's Guanyin is a theatrical role, an illusion. In an added historical twist, Guanyin herself underwent a sexual transformation: although originally arriving in China in the fourth century as a male deity, by the 16th century she had merged with local fertility goddesses to become a female fertility figure with the power to grant sons.

Both the narrative and the visual discourses **juxtapose theatrics with real life, and surface glitter with inner substance**. And in the end, Master Liang's power to save the situation emerges from the uniting of his stage role (illusion) with his secular power as a person ('reality'). The film presents a series of nested lessons about the deceptiveness of appearances vs. true, underlying value.

American audiences tend to see this film as being *about* gender – reading the girl-child Gouwa as carrying a message about undervaluing women. Indeed, one reviewer wrote, “the real project of *King of Masks* is a plea to China at large: Start valuing your girl babies.”³ I would suggest, rather, that the very appropriation of gender in *King of Masks* is meant to cause us to look *beyond* gender. The roles of both Guowa and Master Liang articulate the much larger epistemological issue of how responding to superficial appearances -- or 'masks' (of which gender is only an instance) -- can lead to tragically misperceiving true essence.

Finally: this film affirms both Buddhist (and Daoist) **ideals of a moral universe**: an ethos of Karma, which dictates that motives and actions, causes and consequences, rewards and punishments, in the final cosmic determination, will all be balanced out fairly and justly.

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² The 'face' referring to personal reputation or prestige is a different word: 面子 *miànzi*.

³ Harlan Jacobson, WFUV-FM, New York Public Radio, 4/29/99 (www.talkcinema.com)