

Review

An Empathetic Odyssey: A Film Review of *Barbarian Invasion* (2021) by Tan Chui Mui

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ABSTRACT

Barbarian Invasion is the latest feature film by Tan Chui Mui, a Malaysian independent film pioneer. The narrative has two parts. First, the film follows the character of Moon (played by Tan Chui Mui), a middle-aged actress forced to confront her midlife crisis while trying to return to her career. She brings her son to the beach to visit her old-time friend, Roger Woo (played by Pete Teo), who plans to make a *kung fu* film. Roger convinces Moon to take up the lead role in his upcoming film. Moon then began to receive *kung fu* training from Master Lo (played by James Lee). Second, Moon is acting as a muted illegal migrant woman who keeps fighting and running for her life.

Keywords: *Barbarian Invasion, Tan Chui Mui, independent film, Malaysian cinema*

Barbarian Invasion is the latest feature film by Tan Chui Mui, a Malaysian independent film pioneer. The narrative has two parts. First, the film follows the character of Moon (played by Tan Chui Mui), a middle-aged actress forced to confront her midlife crisis while trying to return to her career. She brings her son to the beach to visit her old-time friend, Roger Woo (played by Pete Teo), who plans to make a *kung fu* film. Roger convinces Moon to take up the lead role in his upcoming film. Moon then begins to receive *kung fu* training from Master Lo (played by James Lee). Second, Moon is acting as a muted illegal migrant woman who keeps fighting and running for her life.

The main theme of empathy in the film is revealed through the multiple layers of issues like motherhood, middle age working women, and the philosophical question of life's meaning. It is a compelling narrative that delves deep into complicated and intricate feminist themes, thus enriching the viewer's experience by triggering introspective thoughts and emotions that linger well beyond the film. Tan Chui Mui uses a meta-cinematic technique to create a self-questioning character by combining various identities, such as mother, wife, artist, citizen, and illegal migrant. She draws inspiration from her life as an independent filmmaker, actress and mother to create two unique characters, Moon and a female immigrant with aphasia, both played by herself in the film.

The film's complex plot structure, crafted by Tan, is commendable. It is imbued with layers of intertextual meaning that unfurl as the narrative progresses, adding a captivating sense of intrigue and depth. This aspect enriches the narrative tapestry, making it a complex labyrinth of interconnected thoughts and ideas, beautifully woven together to create a rich viewing experience that demands the audience's emotional and sensory engagements.

For instance, the central motif of the film revolves around Moon's poignant journey of self-discovery as she grapples with the existential question, a query that has puzzled humanity for centuries, "Who am I?" The protagonist, Moon, engages in a relentless pursuit of self-identification and meaning in a world that seems

to be constantly shifting beneath her feet. The exploration of this existential question provides a narrative backbone to the film, enhancing the depth of the plot and its characters.

The subject matter of self-searching and the quest for understanding one own self is masterfully expanded and woven into the fabric of the narrative in the latter half of the film. The second section of the narrative cleverly employs the *kung fu* subgenre to create social commentary by shifting the focus from Moon's individual quest of the meaning of life to the struggle of the most marginalised community as the muted character serves to exemplify another form of women's self-actualisation. This is manifested when the film's narrative takes an unexpected turn and uses the idea of a play within a play, making Moon assume the character of an unidentified migrant labourer who, other than leading a hard life as a fugitive, is literally "voiceless" or "muted." The story then shifts its focus to depicting the unfortunate woman's painful experiences and how she is being exploited as a human trafficking victim. Moon, stepping into the shoes of a female immigrant afflicted with aphasia, helps the audiences delve deeper into layers of humane emotion and resilience.

Moon's portrayal of the immigrant character brings to light the lived experiences that illegal immigrant workers often face while trying to survive in a foreign land. This adds a layer of depth and relatability to the contemporary Malaysian society, making the film complex, realistic, and evocative. The fusion of these intricate characterisation with an action backdrop provides an exciting and inspirational development of the film's central theme, namely the empathetic odyssey.

Simultaneously, the film does not shy away from portraying the perpetual struggle that artists often endure in their creative process. This struggle is profoundly mirrored in Moon's emotional contemplation of the existential question, "Who am I?" This deeply personal exploration aligns perfectly with the film's overarching critique of the philosophy of "art for art's sake." Exploring this idea, Tan Chui Mui intricately constructs a contemplative narrative space. Through the thoughtful dialogue exchanged between the characters of Moon and Roger, the film delves into the nuanced conflicts and hardships inherent in independent filmmaking.

Their conversation serves as a mirror, reflecting the perennial conundrum independent filmmakers face. This predicament uncovers in striking a delicate balance between commercial appeal and artistic aspiration. As independent filmmakers, they constantly grapple with the balance of choosing between commercial viability and maintaining artistic integrity.

Their dialogues provide an introspective look into the difficult balancing act that independent filmmakers face. In essence, the film transforms into a forum for dissecting and examining the often-undiscussed tensions that arise when seeking a balance between market demands and the pursuit of artistic authenticity. In the clever employment of the meta-cinema, the audience finds itself seemingly drawn into an intimate dialogue between the two principal characters. The fervour and adoration for cinema as a pure art form is palpable, embodied by the actors and directors both inside and outside the film. Their shared passion resonates through the film, affirming their collective dedication to preserving the integrity of filmmaking as an artistic pursuit.

In the film's second half, there's a notable shift as it takes on the role of a societal tool, highlighting the injustices faced by immigrants. How can a film gain mainstream appeal if it's overtly artsy and laden with profound societal concerns? It might seem counterproductive to centre a film around these elements. Yet, this film cleverly tackles this challenge rather than shying away from it. By employing a meta-film approach, it strategically fosters critical discussions on societal issues, underscoring the belief that cinema can and should be a potent medium for social commentary and change.

Drawing on the vibrant landscape of independent cinema, Tan Chui Mui crafts an engaging blend of artistic prowess by bringing together the performances of two prominent independent filmmakers—Pete Teo and James Lee. This thoughtful casting not only amplifies the narrative's impact but also paints a vivid picture of the rich scene of Malaysian independent cinema.

James Lee, an independent-turn-commercial filmmaker in real life, portrays the action and comic character of "Master Lo" in the film. This character has a darkly humorous edge that brings a unique joy to the film. The inclusion of *kung fu*, a traditionally popular commercial subgenre, injects the film with energetic action sequences, enhancing its pace and visual dynamism.

Barbarian Invasion demonstrates a creative use of the *kung fu* to illustrate the hard-hitting realities of life in the scene when Moon repeatedly asks the question of "Who am I?" Master Lo replies with literal punches on her face until she bleeds. This is how the film employs a visceral move to answer an abstract and philosophical question. It seems the film attempts to make a statement that action film can offer spectators more than gore and pleasure, despite being popularly known as an entertaining genre. In other words, the film appears to suggest that the intense visceral portrayal of pain can prompt deeper contemplation on philosophical questions.

This film presents complex perspectives and emotions, sometimes conflicting and sometimes harmonising. The visual contrast characterisation between James Lee's "toughness" and Pete Teo's "softness" within the film captures the balance between entertaining commercialisation and the director's desire for artsy exploration of unique, thought-provoking, and challenging subject matter of marginal community. The filmmaker Tan Chui Mui's maturity and wit are evident in this visual strategy, demonstrating how art films can simultaneously conform to mainstream standards while pursuing a distinct artistic vision that is aesthetically engaging and socially significant.

Even though constrained by a modest budget, this film transcends monetary limitations to exhibit superior production values. Its innovative utilisation of cinematography, audio design, and editing testifies to the creative prowess behind the scenes, transforming potentially restrictive constraints into compelling artistic choices.

To further enliven the narrative and capture the audience's engagement, *Barbarian Invasion* artfully modulates between slow and fast narrative rhythms. This dynamic pacing not only adds an unexpected twist to the narrative progression but also maintains a consistent element of intrigue that keeps viewers on the edge of their seats. This skilful blend of tempos enhances the overall visual experiential appeal and ensures that the audience remains captivated throughout the film's runtime.

In an unexpectedly profound parallel, the high-octane, raw intensity of the film's combat sequences creates a visual sensory connection between the audience's viewing experience and the harrowing plight of a victim of human trafficking in a subtle way. Amid the chaotic, adrenaline-fuelled action scenes, a multi-layered meaning is constructed in the film text. Through the brutal, rapid, and frantic action sequences, the film explores the intersection between visceral cinema and stark social realities, amplifying its emotional impact. These sequences are brilliantly conceptualised in cinematic ways. The film engages the spectator to actively feel the cinematic movement, lighting, colour while following the lives and struggles of the muted woman (a metaphor of the marginalised immigrant communities). Through such cinematic construction, the audience's physical and rational thinking is suspended to give way to the all-powerful empathetic feelings that are created on the screen. As an audience in the cinema, I instantly felt the pain and struggle of the "voiceless woman" in the film.

As the film nears its end, viewers may begin to notice the intertextuality of the causal relationship between characters and the unfolding events. But, more importantly, the layers of the immersive viewing experience incorporate the spectator's subjective feelings. This invites the spectators to "contemplate" and "feel" extreme poverty and hopelessness, but not to "think" about them.

I salute *Barbarian Invasion* because the film adeptly sheds light on social issues that are often sidestepped or ignored by the mainstream media in Malaysia. The film is an audacious endeavour that underscores the plight of the minority communities, evoking reflection on the broader societal injustice. In a particularly innovative manner, *Barbarian Invasion* artfully merges the realms of narrative cinema and the *kung fu* genre in an entertaining yet thoughtful way. This amalgamation engenders shifting subjectivities that continually challenge the viewers' bias perception and feeling of empathy towards immigrants and refugees. More impressively, this cinematic experiment enables the viewers to empathetically connect with the protagonist, a voiceless woman battling the brutal realities of statelessness, thus creating a deeper understanding between mainstream audiences and the underserved minority.

Through this empathetic bridge, it allows audiences to step out of their comfort zones, encouraging them to engage in perspectives often unheard in their everyday life. This engagement with emotions and feelings is the film's most powerful tool, further validating the idea that cinema is not just a form of entertainment but also a vehicle for critical social commentary and empathy.

Tan Chui Mui has created a cultural product that should appeal to art-house audience while mainly remaining true to her artistic vision of giving the voiceless population a public platform in the world of popular culture. More than merely a storyteller, the writer-director Tan steps into the spotlight delivering an extraordinary performance that stands out in the memory of many Malaysian independent film viewers. Her portrayal resonates with authenticity and emotion, thereby creating an on-screen presence that is simultaneously compelling and inspiring. This sincere and emotionally charged performance further intensifies the film's poignancy, making it an exemplary demonstration of the confluence of thoughtful directing and impactful acting.



Figure 1 The official poster of *Barbarian Invasion* when it was released in Malaysian cinemas.

Source: Da Huang Pictures.