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# Acting up



"I can't really help where I come from, or the film. That's my secret; what can I do?" says Jose Ho (below), discussing her new film, Tai Tai (below). Photo: Dennis Ng/ICM

Josie Ho has undergone a makeover. No more the wild child, she's now playing a role closer to home – a tai tai. *Mathew Scott reports*

**A DISCREET INTERVIEW** has been arranged with Josie Ho Chiu-yee, the singer-turned-actress whose name has been making headlines in Hong Kong's gossip columns for the past month. A venue has been chosen where there's no chance Ho will be bothered, or even spotted, by the prying public or paparazzi. And who should be sitting eating lunch at the corner table we have requested but Teresa Mo Shan-ling, the actress who also dishes up dirt on stars via *Entertainment Weekly*, Cable TV's nightly gossip show *Hong Kong may declare itself 'Asia's World City'* but it can still feel like a small town. Luckily, Mo's lunch finishes just as Ho enters and we are left to our own devices.

The press first focused on Ho, the 28-year-old daughter of Macau casino tycoon Stanley Ho Hong-sun, after she threw while singing a ruse penned by local hip-hop crew LMF during last month's Fresh-Look Vision X-Touraganza. It continued when it was revealed her latest film project, an independent short entitled *Tai Tai*, would lay bare the world of Hong Kong's high-society – where she was raised. Members of her family were called in for comment, the most "hard-hitting" coming from younger brother Lawrence Ho Yau-kung who told *Apple Daily* that "Josie's a bit too outrageous. But she's always been rebellious since she was a child". Hardly earth-shattering stuff, but fodder for the masses nonetheless.

The unwanted attention would explain the covert atmosphere of our meeting at Quany Bay's Cafe Einstein on a wild and wet Thursday afternoon. It is set for 3pm, and at about a quarter past the hour, a silver people-mover with tinted windows pulls up a block away. Five minutes later, it creeps up to the left outside the cafe and waiting. There's little visible movement from the vehicle's interior until a young man in an oversized T-shirt, half-cut skate pants and baseball cap enters the bar and says Ho will follow shortly.

When she does arrive, Ho's greeting is warm. She looks fit in flattering hipster jeans and a plunging, multicoloured floral top. It's a far cry from the street-savvy hip-hop clothes in which she graced the past year's social pages – a makeover that has

been performed mostly with her public image in mind, she reveals candidly. Ho takes her place in a booth (just as Mo and her party pay up and make for the exit) and is joined by her young female "artistic assistant" from the Emperor Multimedia Group.

We talk about her image, about how she has long been portrayed in the press as a rebel. Ho has an intensity when she talks, and talking is obviously something she likes to do. She says she is honest, a straight shooter, and that this is a trait that has landed her in plenty of trouble: she speaks her mind, and deals with the consequences later.

Even so, when she is asked about her family's reaction to the recent media storm, the shades come down fast. The subject says there will be "no talk about Josie's lifestyle" and it's like being told by a 10-year-old not to play ball in the house.

Ho shrugs, and smiles. "Sorry but I don't want any more trouble." That's understandable. The Ho clan needs headlines like the SAR needs another over-the-top awards show. But media attention has followed Josie Ho ever since she returned here after finishing high school in Ridley College in Ontario, Canada, in 1988.

After hanging out around town for a year doing nothing much other than deciding which way she wanted her life to go, Ho began negotiations – through elder sister Penny Ho Chiu-king – to sign on as a singer with Virgin Records. These talks, she says, dragged on for more than a year and would eventually lead her nowhere.

Taiwan's Rock Records came to the rescue with a contract in 1993 but controversy would soon follow. First, there was her couch-thrusting performance in Taiwan in 1995, then that dreadlocked look as she moved from pop to rock, and finally her most recent music incarnation as Hong Kong's trash-talking hip-hop queen.

But now, she says, the music is behind her and she has one love: acting. The affair started as a flirtation with director Ching Wing-ling's *Wing Yee* in 1994, and has since blossomed into a full-blown passion, the highlight so far being her acclaimed performance as a terrorist in Teddy Chan's *Purple Storm* (1999). But still the "wild child" image clings to her like a shadow.

"Basically, that's the way the local media sees me and like to present me to the public," says Ho. "They think that I look like some huge rebel. But I don't care, I don't think I can even be considered this way. I add my own perspective to things and it could be a little bit different or off-the-track from most of the mass market, but that doesn't mean I'm a rebel. I think it shows they have a very narrow-minded perspective themselves. I'm proud of being an individual."

Ho says this image has restricted her acting career thus far, and that she expected more roles to be offered after *Purple Storm*. But even then, she says, it had taken eight long years for people to start to throw roles her way.

"No matter how hard I tried, people wouldn't give me offers because of my family background and this rebellious image. I think Chinese people are just slower at accepting people for who they are," she says.

"I used to dress really funky, and I think that scared away a lot of production people. They get stuck with the way you look here and never look beyond that. They'd say: 'Josie looks too masculine, she's too

androgynous and not really feminine.' But you know, it's just a look."

Luckily for her, New York-based director Nicholas Chin – whom Ho met through a mutual friend – thought her look, and her background, were perfect when he was casting for his 25-minute short, *Tai Tai*.

An overseas-educated Chinese himself, Chin grew up in London, graduated from Cambridge University and worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation's film unit before moving to the United States to branch out on his own. The 28-year-old gathered the funds needed to make *Tai Tai* himself, drafted in emerging Hong Kong-based cinematographer Charlie Lam (winner of the 2001 Kodak Vision Award in Hong Kong) and shot the whole thing in just four days at the beginning of August. They used some of the city's landmarks, such as the China Club and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel as a backdrop, and drew on the talent of costumer Nancy Cheung to complete the look of the SAR's rich and famous.

Although still in the post-production stage, Chin plans to submit the finished product to some of the world's leading in-

dependent film festivals, including Sundance, London, New York and Berlin.

In the film, Ho plays Chiu, a tai tai who turns to a toyboy in an effort to find the love that's missing from her marriage.

"No director in Hong Kong would dare cast me in such a part," says Ho. "They would never imagine someone with my type of image could do such a role. But Nicholas didn't care."

Ho says the film is a warts-and-all look at the tai-tai life, and she should know: growing up the daughter of a billionaire, she had ample opportunity to witness the lifestyle at firsthand. And while she says the film doesn't paint a pretty picture of the tai tai's world, it comes very close to the mark.

"It's really about Hong Kong's elite and how brave they actually are. The director wanted to capture not this glamorous side to their lives, but what's beneath the glamour – the sadness and the quiet pain," Ho says.

"They [tai tai] want to get married to a rich man, so they are then financially dependent on the man. And then they are basically housewives. It's a real Chinese tradition. The daughter marries a rich man so she can

use his money to take care of her own family, so then the whole family becomes dependent on her. It's pretty bad, there's a lot of pain, but they do hide it very well."

When it's suggested that appearing in such a film will do nothing if not draw attention to herself again – especially if it comes across in any way critical of the world from which she has come, Ho says with a shrug that it's beyond her control. And she's of the same opinion when it's suggested that it's easy – given a track-record where she has never really worried for anything – to criticize a lifestyle some people see as an escape from a more "real" world of financial burdens, debts or even poverty.

"I can't really help where I come from, or my own life," she says. "That's my secret: no one can. I can't help where I come from, and what can I do? But one of the reasons I wanted to do the role was I would never even be asked. Obviously I don't need the money to live my life, but what I'm doing here is to say it's my way with my background – to take this approach."

"I used to think [tai tai] were really pathetic. I used to have no sympathy towards them: thinking what do they have to do other than look pretty, shop, get drunk, play mahjong. But after working with this movie and this director, I've seen there is this pain that comes with the role they play as well."

How does she react to seeing herself quoted and talked about constantly? Facing to the topic, she is adamant that she welcomes the criticism – if she deems it helpful – and says she delights in getting a reaction from people anyway. And she cites her change in the clothes she wears in public as an example of how she is using criticism to her advantage.

"I wasn't getting roles because I wasn't looking feminine enough," she says. "I thought, 'Oh enough. If that's all it takes, I'll change!'"

"You can sometimes call me stupid because I do things that p\*\*\* people off. But I let people step on me first, then I think, 'Is it necessary, this criticism?' And if I think that it is, I think, OK, fine, I'll use it to my advantage and learn from it."

"Look, I am proud of myself for having a talent – that I can act. So I can stick to that. I can survive just being the way I am." [news@scmp.com](mailto:news@scmp.com)

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