

# MISTRESS DISPELLER

*A film by Elizabeth Lo*



94 minutes | China, USA | 2024

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## LOGLINE

Desperate to save her marriage, a woman in China hires a professional to go undercover and break up her husband's affair. With strikingly intimate access, *Mistress Dispeller* follows this unfolding family drama from all corners of a love triangle.

## SYNOPSIS

In China, a new industry has emerged devoted to helping couples stay married in the face of infidelity. Wang Zhenxi is part of this growing profession, a “mistress dispeller” who is hired to maintain the bonds of marriage — and break up affairs — by any means necessary. Offering strikingly intimate access to private dramas usually hidden behind closed doors, *Mistress Dispeller* follows a real, unfolding case of infidelity as Teacher Wang attempts to bring a couple back from the edge of crisis. Their story shifts our sympathies between husband, wife and mistress to explore the ways emotion, pragmatism and cultural norms collide to shape romantic relationships in contemporary China.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I have loved love stories for as long as I can remember. Growing up in Hong Kong, the romance section of our local movie rental store was always the first place I'd look. I came of age watching movies like *A Room with A View*, *Notting Hill*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Moulin Rouge* and *Lost in Translation* on repeat. Like many around the world, these idealized visions of romance shaped mine.

Yet my experience of love within my own family was markedly different from what I saw represented in these movies. In my home, love was bound up with sacrifice, duty and what's left unsaid. As a director, I wanted to see this specific kind of love through my own camera, and use a crisis of infidelity as my entryway to discover how emotion is expressed and experienced in my culture.

The film is set within the world of mistress dispelling, a new “love industry” specialized in ending affairs between married spouses and their extramarital lovers that has only emerged within the last decade in China (a response to rising rates of adultery that have ballooned alongside its economy). For a fee that can start at tens of thousands of dollars, a mistress dispeller is typically hired for two to three months by a wife to infiltrate a mistress's life — to gain the mistress's confidence under a false identity and influence her to end the affair of her own accord. There are no exact figures for how many operate in China, but ads for hundreds of mistress dispelling companies exist online. During our scouting process, we met with dozens of them — until we found Wang Zhenxi.

Teacher Wang's clients seem to adore and trust her (including the mistresses she befriends) and this allowed us to gain unprecedented access to all angles of what would typically be a private family matter concealed by shame. My aim was to craft a *Rashomon*-inspired romance that empathetically portrayed all sides of a love triangle. Like *Rashomon*, our film is set during a time of national tumult;

our protagonists are grappling with seismic shifts to society and family that have resulted from China's rapidly expanding middle and upper classes and the rising divorce rate.

In filming this fractured love story, something indefinable around longing, loneliness and regret sprang from its cracks. By eschewing camera movement and holding shots for unconventionally long amounts of time, Mr. Li, Mrs. Li and Fei Fei were allowed to feel comfortable enough to reveal deeper layers of themselves as they struggled with shortcomings I found all too relatable: the repression of emotion, the difficulty of expression, the excitement of connection, the dread of abandonment. Over China's sweeping landscapes, we chose a soundtrack that stretched from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* to French indie band Odezenne to convey the eternal pull — between connection and conformity, duty and desire, the past and the present — that lives in each of us.

In an era of increasing polarization between the US and China, it was important to me as a Hong Kong citizen to make a documentary film that bridges this divide rather than alienating people and cultures from one another. By investigating an experience that is at once universally familiar and uniquely specific to contemporary China, I hope to ask what it means to hurt, to heal, to fear loneliness, and to love, in the 21st century.

– Elizabeth Lo

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Going into this project, we knew casting and production would be an extreme challenge because we wanted to document an authentic mistress dispelling case unfolding from beginning to end, in real time. Over the course of two years and multiple trips to China, we built up our relationship with Teacher Wang and documented her work. We tasked Wang and her business partner with leading the casting process from her organic pool of real, incoming clients. Out of hundreds of incoming cases, they identified a handful that were willing to be on camera. It took nearly a year for us to find a case with compelling, rich characters and where all three participants were willing to give us the kind of access that Mr. Li, Mrs. Li and Fei Fei did.

*Teacher Wang taught me a lot. About love, and other things. She said, "Look, you are going through this, this difficulty, and we should film it, so more women, more people, can face their families and learn how to handle a situation like this..." I want more people to know that love doesn't come easy, especially for people at our age. Don't give up so easily.*

– MRS. LI

Another challenge we faced with documenting the mistress dispelling process was that some degree of deception was inherent to Teacher Wang's work, and we had to figure out how to handle this from an ethical perspective. The husband and mistress couldn't have known exactly what the film was about in the beginning in order for us to capture the mistress dispelling process organically. Initially, they were approached by Wang's business partner about sharing their stories as part of a documentary about modern love in China, and both agreed to participate. Our intention was always to transparently discuss the specifics of the film and story once the process was captured.

Throughout this process, our interactions with Mr. Li, Mrs. Li and Fei Fei were mediated by Wang and her staff. Although this was an unusual filmmaker-subject dynamic, it also suited my observational "fly-on-the-wall" filmmaking. That said, the camera was an inevitable catalyst in every scene – both in bringing to the surface what each person imagined to be their best self and in suppressing the darkest expression of their emotions. While everyone's reasons for why they chose to take part in our documentary were varied and in some ways unknowable, the one thing I am certain of is that Mr. Li, Mrs. Li and Fei Fei each possessed an enlightened attitude towards their own lives that was deeply generous and unselfconscious.

When the film was almost finished, Wang did a "safety review" to ensure that nothing would be in breach of China's laws and endanger our participants or crew. We then showed the film to each participant so they could fully grasp the truth of Wang's role in their lives and review their portrayals. We were prepared at any point to pivot to a more diffuse artistic approach, focusing on multiple love industries, should participants withdraw their consent. Fortunately, Mr. Li, Mrs. Li and Fei Fei all chose to remain in the film.

*I am willing to participate in filming because, considering the long river of life, this is a small part of it. But it's also something that's significant to me right now. I see this as a documentary of my life. It is also a portrait of love. From the beginning of our encounter, to the middle of the relationship, and the end, it's all part of this process of love... Love doesn't disappear, it just diverts. It's just a process of love moving around. It's quite meaningful to make time to recall and witness the process for yourself – whether the path you take is right or not... When others see this film, they might gain some insights from it.*

– FEI FEI



## KEY CREATIVE BIOS

### **Elizabeth Lo 罗宝 – Director, Producer, Cinematographer, Co-Editor**

Elizabeth is a filmmaker whose documentary films have been showcased at Sundance, IDFA, SXSW, Tribeca, MoMA, AFI Fest, True/False, New York Times Op-Docs, Field of Vision and PBS' POV. Elizabeth has been featured in Filmmaker Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film," DOC NYC's "40 Under 40," and Cannes Lions' "New Directors Showcase." She is a recipient of artist fellowships from Locarno, New York Film Festival, Yaddo and MacDowell, and was selected for the Concordia Studio Fellowship and Gotham/HBO Documentary Development Initiative. Her debut feature, *Stray*, won Best International Feature at Hot Docs and received nominations from the Independent Spirit Awards, Critics Choice Documentary Awards and Cinema Eye Honors after premiering at Tribeca in 2020. A New York Times "Critic's Pick," *Stray* was released theatrically by Magnolia Pictures and is now streaming on Hulu. Her short films — including *Hotel 22*, *Bisonhead*, and *Mother's Day* — have been acquired by colleges and libraries worldwide. Elizabeth holds a BFA from NYU Tisch School of the Arts and an MFA from Stanford University. She was born and raised in Hong Kong.

### **Emma D. Miller – Producer**

Emma is a Gotham Award–nominated filmmaker whose work explores the messiness and beauty of being human. She produced Iliana Sosa's SXSW award-winning *What We Leave Behind* (ARRAY Releasing/Netflix), a New York Times "Critic's Pick," and recently directed the short documentary *The School of Canine Massage* (SXSW 2024). As development executive for nonfiction at Concordia Studio, she worked on Oscar-nominated and Emmy-winning films that premiered at Sundance, Tribeca and Telluride, including *Time* (Amazon Studios), *Boys State* (Apple TV+/A24) and *Procession* (Netflix). She was a casting associate for Showtime's *Couples Therapy* series; associate producer of the Academy Award-nominated short documentary *Knife Skills* (The New Yorker); associate producer of the Oscar-shortlisted, Sundance award-winning feature *Unrest* (Independent Lens/Netflix); and co-producer of an upcoming feature for National Geographic Documentaries. Emma was named one of DOC NYC's "40 Under 40" and is a 2023 Sundance Producing Lab Fellow and 2024 JFI Filmmaker in Residence. She is currently directing her feature debut, *Father Figures*.

### **Maggie Li 李琪 – Producer**

Maggie is a Shanghai-based producer, simultaneous interpreter and magazine editor. She co-produced Jessica Kingdon's 2022 Oscar-nominated documentary *Ascension* 登楼叹, which won Best Documentary at Tribeca Film Festival and was acquired by MTV Documentary Films. In addition, Maggie has worked as a producer for media companies including the BBC, PBS, Reuters, National Geographic, CNBC, Discovery Network Asia, VPRO, Business Week and CICC, and produced commercial work for clients including Deloitte, Bain & Co, Colliers, J.P. Morgan, Bunzl, SKII and Dior. In 2023, she was selected as an artist resident at the Swatch Art Peace Hotel in Shanghai. She is currently producing Devon Blackwell's *Panda Diplomacy* and Nathan Truesdell's *Mystery Seeds*; co-producing Jessica Kingdon's *Untitled Animal Project*, Violet Feng's *Dating Coach* series and Ian Bell's *WTO/99*; and directing her feature debut about a 30-year-old neighborhood bar in Shanghai.

### **Charlotte Munch Bengtsen – Editor**

Charlotte was a dancer and photographer before studying for a masters in film editing at NFTS, UK. She has edited multiple award-winning feature documentaries, including Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, Christy Garland's *The Bastard Sings the Sweetest Song*, Ada Søby's *American Losers*, Boris Bertram's *War Photographer*, Lasse Lau's *The Raven & The Seagull* and Michael Dweck & Gregory Kershaw's 2021 Oscar-shortlisted *The Truffle Hunters* (Sundance, Cannes), for which she received a Critic's Choice Award nomination for best editing. Charlotte's latest credits are Robin Petre's *From the Wild Sea*, Ai Weiwei's *Rohinga* and Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes*. *All That Breathes*, the first film to win Best Documentary at both Sundance and Cannes, won a Gotham Award for Best Documentary and received multiple nominations from the Cinema Eye Honors, IDA Awards, Critic's Choice Documentary Awards and Peabody Awards, as well as an Academy Award nomination.

### **Anonymous Content**

Anonymous Content is a global media company that produces multi-platform premium content and boasts an exceptional client roster which includes many of the world's most renowned and innovative directors, writers and actors. The company's award-winning Film & TV division encompasses many commercially successful and critically acclaimed works including three-time Academy Award-winning film *The Revenant*; Best Picture Academy Award winning film *Spotlight*; Academy Award-winning film for Best Original Screenplay *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; and three-time Primetime Emmy Award-winning *Mr. Robot*. On the film side, they are behind the recently released features *FOE*, starring Saoirse Ronan, Paul Mescal and Aaron Pierre, and *The Marsh King's Daughter* starring Daisy Ridley, as well as the highly anticipated upcoming adaptation of Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Nickel Boys*. Series include season four of *True Detective* starring Jodie Foster, *Time Bandits* from Taika Waititi, *Disclaimer* from Alfonso Cuarón starring Cate Blanchett, limited series *East of Eden* starring Florence Pugh with Zoe Kazan set to adapt, and *Savant* starring Jessica Chastain. The company also has a robust documentary division, boasting a burgeoning slate of premium features including Alex Gibney's *Musk*, Jesse Moss and Tony Gerber's *War Game*, *Union*, *5 Seasons of Revolution*, Raoul Peck's *Orwell*, and *In Restless Dreams: The Music of Paul Simon*. Through its commercial work, Anonymous Content is also the driving creative force behind countless leading global brands. As part of Anonymous Content's continued global expansion, the company has established multiple joint ventures with international partners including Spain-based Morena Films, AC Federation, AC Nordic, AC Brazil and AC Chapter One.

### **Impact Partners**

Impact Partners is dedicated to funding independent documentary storytelling that entertains audiences, engages with pressing social issues and propels the art of cinema forward. Over the span of 15 years, Impact Partners has been involved in the financing of over 150 films, including: *Icarus*, which won the 2018 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; *32 Sounds*, which won 2024 Cinema Eye Honors for Outstanding Nonfiction Feature; *Aftershock*, which won a 2023 Peabody Award; *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, which won the 2019 Independent Spirit Award for Best Documentary; *Dina*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival and was named Best Feature by the International Documentary Association; *The Eagle Huntress*, which was nominated for the 2017 BAFTA Award for Best Documentary; *How to Survive a Plague*, which was nominated for the 2013 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; *Of Fathers and Sons*, which was nominated for the 2019 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature; and *Hell and Back Again*,

which won the Documentary Grand Jury Prize Award at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

## CREDITS

**Directed and Produced by**  
Elizabeth Lo

**Produced by**  
Emma D. Miller

**Producer**  
Maggie Li

**Edited by**  
Charlotte Munch Bengtsen

**Co-Edited by**  
Elizabeth Lo

**Written by**  
Elizabeth Lo  
Charlotte Munch Bengtsen

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Jessica Grimshaw  
David Levine  
Dawn Olmstead

**Executive Producers**  
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Kelsey Koenig  
Geraldyn White Dreyfous

**Executive Producers**  
Rahdi Taylor  
Davis Guggenheim

**Executive Producers**  
Steve Cohen  
Paula Froehle

**Co-Executive Producers**  
Lauren Haber  
Marni E. J. Grossman



**Original Music by**  
Brian McOmber

**Director of Photography**  
Elizabeth Lo

**Co-Editor**  
Ora DeKornfeld

**Assistant Editor**  
Jiuxin Zhu 朱九鑫

**Consulting Producers**  
Mable Chan 陈美宝  
Jess Kwan

**Drone Operator & Additional Cinematographer**  
Cui Ligang 崔立刚

**Sound Recordists**  
Derek Chen 陈斌  
Zhang Xuechao 张雪朝  
Wang Ke 王可  
Yue Hengjie 岳恒杰

**Production Assistant & DIT**  
Boyu Zhu 朱柏宇

**Additional Camera**  
Duan Taiqiang 段台枪  
Ding Yu 丁宇

**Additional Production Assistants**  
Chen Gaoli 陈高利  
Wu Zhaoguang 吴照广

**Set Photography**  
Chen Jie 陈杰

**Post Production Sound Services Provided by**  
This is Sound Design

**Sound Designer & Supervising Sound Editor**  
Nathan Ruyle

**Re-Recording Mixers**

Nathan Ruyle  
Robert Louis Howley

**Dialogue Editor**

William Hsieh 謝錦牲

**Sound Effects Editor**

Dahee Kim

**Foley Mixer**

Michael Stevenson

**Foley Artist**

Mike Miller

**Studio Coordinator**

Romelia Osorio

**Music Supervisor**

Andrew Gross

**Music Editor**

Brian McOmber

**Music Mixer**

Ben Greenberg

**Colorist**

Robert Arnold, RDAcolor

**Digital Intermediate Services**

DCTV

Different By Design

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Emma Berliner

**Chinese Title Designer**

Leo Mak 麥家亮

**Additional Assistant Editor**

Ina Ho 何正琳

**Research Assistants**

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Guo Xuanxu 郭宣序

**Subtitles**

Jerry Rudes, Mistral Artist - NYC

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Scott & Molly Forstall

Marni E. J. Grossman

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Film Festival 2022

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Creative Executive – Sydne Klein, Beatriz Martins

Executive Assistants – Elizabeth Jaregui & Adam Glusker

**For Impact Partners:**

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Development Manager – Chelsea Williams  
Chief Operating Officer – Amy Augustino  
Operations Manager – Skye Ward

**Songs**

"O Mio Babbino Caro"

Written by Giacomo Puccini

Performed by Miriam Gauci, Belgian Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra, Alexander  
Rahbari

Courtesy of Naxos Of America Inc.

By Arrangement with HD Music Now Inc.

"Goshawks"

Written by William Ryan Fritch

Performed by William Ryan Fritch

Courtesy of William Ryan Fritch

"Madame Butterfly, Act II: Humming Chorus"

Written by Giacomo Puccini

Performed by Sophia National Opera Chorus and Orchestra

Courtesy of Naxos Of America Inc.

By Arrangement with HD Music Now Inc.

"Seashepherd 04"

Written by Ali Helnwein

Performed by Ali Helnwein

Courtesy of Pterodactyl Scene

"Hardcore"

Performed by Odezenne

Written by Alix Caillet, Jacques Cormary & Mattia Lucchini

Courtesy of Universeul & Universeul Publishing

"Pelle di Luna"

Written by Piero Umiliani

Performed by Piero Umiliani

Courtesy of Liuto Edizioni Musicali

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