MISTRESS OF THE SEA
Margaret Chan on Chinese mediums and her iconic roles

Question: How is a temple a performance? When we talk about performance in the temple, we're not talking about Shakespearean performances. We have this idea of the Western stage, of performance. But for the Chinese, the idea of theatre as entertainment only came in the 19th century. Temple is ritual theatre. I don't mean it's putting on an act. People ask me, does it still exist? But that's a question I'd ask, if I study only the performance. It's a particularly colourful theatre. It's temple worship. You see the temple go into transformations. The spirit becomes he, becomes the god, in that spirit, it is the very god incarnate. Then, he dances, and when the god leaves, it's only human. Spirit is not just about being possessed. It's a ritual, it's theatre, it's entertainment.

Question: Why do the people think in terms of themselves as mediums? When they put on these terms, the people take on this spirit: the person comes from the earth, around, and control is its nature. It's about control, I can take this incredible pain, I'm therefore a god. Do they have wounds? Yes, some of them have to go to the hospital. The amount of pain they take is significant. It's a very old tradition that dates back 3,000 years.

Question: Why does it take to be a temple? When we're born, our body spirit is full but, one soul spirit is half-empty. For a man, you reach 21 years in half. From a woman, it becomes full when she's married. For a spirit, it's always half-complete. He's like a half-empty cup which allows the spirit to come in.

Question: Why are you fascinated with spirits? Even though we were raised in Catholicism, my family would take me to watch Diwakshana when I was a little girl. I almost got in a trance once when I saw a hula-hair. There was a music, the drum, the singing. I left my head to see what's happening. That was, what moved me.

Question: What do you think about Ivan Heng dressing up to play Emily? When a man dresses in drag, it's a question of identity. Gender politics comes in. It's like these roles between binaries. They may not have but they're actually women in spirit. It's kind of transgression.

Question: How would you play Emily now if you were to change the character? Actually, I'm older than Emily. The play begins with Emily at 19 and then she aged. I feel I'm too old, but I think there may be another Emily (performance) under me. I succeeded as Emily because I allowed the character part of me to come out. I'm sure the audience would think, Mr. God, she's a real woman. That's the only way she knows how to lie. How would I play her again? I'd be a bit quieter Emily. There's still that mysterious side that would have to come out.

Question: How do you feel about being typecast as a villain? Villains are not to play because heroines are usually nuns-priests. You always have to feel sorry for people. You do good things, you have very little to come out. The villain often carries the action that causes everything to happen.

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