

Behind the scenes



Helen Pang (MSc Econ 1992, BSc Econ 1991) is a film and video examiner at the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). Set up by the film industry in 1912, the BBFC is the UK's classification body for all films, videos and DVDs (as well as some video games) that are released in this country, whether for sale or rental. Most of the works (12,000 submissions in 2002) are viewed by various teams of examiners.

'Within our teams, we discuss the issues contained within the work, whether sex, violence, drugs or language and, in accordance with our guidelines, decide on a suitable category, ranging from Uc (pre-school) to R18 (hard-core pornography sold only in licensed sex shops). Our reports are read by one of three senior examiners, who usually approves the recommended category, after which the BBFC issues a certificate to the distributor. There are occasions, however, when the two examiners will disagree on a category, in which case the work will be viewed by a second team of three examiners. Really controversial works, such as *Irreversible*, will be seen by the whole examining body, as well as by the director, president and two vice-presidents of the BBFC. Scenes that are particularly problematic will also be shown at our weekly examiners' meeting, and discussed by the examining team of 19 people.

'I was hired as a bilingual examiner, and am occasionally programmed to watch Hong Kong TVB serial dramas because I speak Cantonese. These come to us without English subtitles, as they are aimed at the Chinese community, but legally still require classification. Getting some Cantonese work can be really enjoyable as I can watch these

on my own, although it's difficult when I get four episodes in the middle of a series when I haven't seen the previous episodes – and then don't get to see the ending either!

'We view submissions five hours a day, three and a half days a week. Our weekly examiners' meeting is on Friday mornings, and we also have one day of non-viewing dedicated to research and educational projects aimed at children, media students and interested adults. This day is also used to reply to any correspondence from the public, which usually consists of complaints about a particular category that we have given a film. For example, a colleague and I examined *Bad Boys 2* and I have had to respond to three letters of complaint so far, from people who thought it was too violent for a 15 category. I have also had to respond to complaints about the frequent use of strong language in Eminem's film *8 Mile*. Overall, though, we receive very few letters in comparison to the number of works we classify.

'How did I get such a job? I just happened to come across a newspaper ad looking for bilingual examiners in Hindi or Cantonese and thought it would be a fascinating job to do. I've always loved watching films and television programmes, and also grew up watching Hong Kong serial dramas and martial arts films without any parental supervision. The more I learnt about the job during the intensive interview process, the more I knew this was the job for me. In a single day, I can be programmed to watch anything from classic *Thunderbirds* episodes to hard core pornography, but you learn to take everything in your stride! Unfortunately we are not allowed to choose what we classify, otherwise we would all be fighting over the best films.

'Examiners come from a range of backgrounds, such as social work, teaching, law, and journalism, so we have a wide range of opinions on all subjects, which makes our debates quite colourful at times. I believe that we play an important role in regulation and that our categories help parents to decide what is suitable viewing for their children. I have also been working with a colleague on an educational project aimed at 8 to 11 year

olds, a children's website at www.cbbfc.co.uk which explains the classification process to young people. Overall, I find my job extremely challenging and fulfilling, and am always happy to watch more television at home at the end of a day!'

Did you know...

In the film *A Fish Called Wanda* there is a scene where John Cleese escapes out of a back door of the Law Courts and jumps into his car. The Lionel Robbins Building is seen quite clearly in the background.

In the 1980s BBC TV comedy *Ever Decreasing Circles*, Richard Briers is organising a sit-in when someone starts singing 'We shall overcome ...' He retorts: 'We're supposed to be intelligent people, not the London School of Economics!'

In 1968 a short story by LSE academic Max Steuer called *The Committee* was made into a feature film. It was produced by Max, directed by Peter Sykes, with music from Pink Floyd and *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown*. The stars were Paul Jones, Tom Kempinski and Robert Lloyd, with cast from the National Theatre. The film was initially distributed by Classic Films and had a West End run of ten weeks, twice as long as expected. It later toured as second feature to Visconti's *The Stranger*.

In November LSE's Hellenic Observatory collaborated with the National Film Theatre and the Hellenic Foundation for Culture, UK, to show the Oscar-winning film *Z*, with a question and answer session afterwards with the film's director Constantin Costa-Gavras.

Sons of the Wind is due for cinema release in France in April, with rest of the world screenings to follow.