

CITIZEN OF THE WORLD, MICHELLE YEOH

Ballerina, martial arts stunt woman, road safety ambassador and soon to be “Aung San Suu Kyi” – Michelle Yeoh is a multi-talented Asian icon with an international appeal that would make her compatriots green with envy.

Certainly one that can pack more than a punch, Michelle Yeoh has blossomed through the years from a promising starlet to the industry veteran she is today. In the West, Michelle holds her own, standing out for her ethnicity, and helping to break the stereotype that Asian women are not all ‘dragon ladies’ or spineless subservient homemakers. In the East, her presence is always greeted with pride and gratitude for being a shining example of independence and empowerment among Asian women.

No business like show business

Born into a prominent family in Ipoh, the Chinese beauty spent her growing up years being immersed in sports, music, and culture. As a teenager, Michelle took part in national swimming, diving and squash competitions. She also played the piano and developed a love for Chinese painting.

These paled in comparison though, to her love for ballet, which she started training for at the age of four. Her dream of becoming a prima ballerina landed her in England, where she attended the London Royal Academy of Dance. However, a spinal injury during a practice session in college left a permanent blow to her ballet career and she never got

the chance to dance professionally on stage.

In 1983, Michelle returned to Malaysia for a summer vacation, only to find that her mother had entered her into a national beauty contest. The then self-confessed tomboy was reluctant but decided to continue with the competition in an effort to appease her mother. She was subsequently crowned Miss Malaysia.

Since then, Michelle has never quite left the limelight. She moved to Hong Kong and was pursued by film mogul Dickson Poon romantically and commercially. Her inaugural entry into showbiz was through a watch advertisement alongside Jackie Chan and Chow Yun-Fat in the mid 1980s. And thanks to Dickson, Michelle was subsequently offered a film contract where she starred in several Hong Kong action films. Henceforth, she scissor-kicked her way to stardom in Asia.

It wasn't until 1997 that Michelle gained international prominence from her role as Colonel Wai Lin in the popular James Bond movie, *Tomorrow Never Dies*. This was quickly followed by several blockbuster films including *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*.



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Later this year, the highly anticipated movie entitled *The Lady*, will be released on the big screen where Michelle Yeoh plays Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in a poignant tale of love embroiled in a political plight.

Voice for the voiceless

Michelle's knowledge of eastern and western culture, coupled with her versatility, makes her the embodiment of a 21st century global citizen. What makes her even more appealing is the willingness to lend a voice to charitable organisations in dire need of awareness and media attention.

Michelle is the ambassador of amfAR (the foundation of AIDS research), Force of Nature, Hong Kong Cancer Fund, ICM (Institute for Cerebral and Medullary Disorders), and LoveFaithHope Charitable Foundation.

At the recent 21st International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) World Volunteer Conference held in Singapore from 24 to 27 January 2011, Michelle Yeoh was one of the luminaries who graced the event to highlight the importance of global road safety.

As the UN global ambassador for the Make Roads Safe campaign, Michelle has been spending a significant amount of time advocating road safety around the globe. She has been attending conferences in New York, Moscow as well as some developing countries, urging governments to take action to improve the road safety situation from education level to road infrastructure.

She shared, "When you hear the numbers, like 1.3 million people dying on the road, every 6 seconds there's a child killed, every 3 seconds there's someone dying on the road, it is horrifying! It is very important for us to do more to protect all road users. It's often just a



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FAMILY AND FRIENDS ALWAYS KEEP ME GROUNDED BECAUSE THEY REMIND ME OF WHERE I COME FROM. EVERYDAY IS A GIFT, LIVE FOR LOVE AND ENJOY LIFE.

simple case of putting a crossing point in to help children get to school or ensuring that cyclists and pedestrians are separated from busy traffic."

Her highly visible support is helping the Make Roads Safe campaign reach millions of people worldwide and spreading the message that much more must be done to combat global road deaths – making road safety a political priority, designing safer roads and safer vehicles, tackling drink driving and inappropriate speed, encouraging use of seat belts and helmets.

"We have been involved in the fight against cancer and AIDS and so many have been working tirelessly to find the cure. But for Make Roads Safe, we actually have all the solutions and the vaccine! We can't afford to allow anybody to die on the road. I spoke about this issue at the United Nations in 2010 on behalf of Malaysia. We managed to put across a decree of action. The goal is to save 5 million lives over the next 10 years, and that is a lot of lives. When you're safe, that goes a long, long way for the rest of your life."

The spirit of giving

Perhaps the perfect blend of Asian foundations and Western open-mindedness has made this articulate ambassador a powerful force in the field of charitable giving. "This spirit [of philanthropy] is one of understanding and commitment for the future. Like many things in life, each person has their own pace. However, if we start searching for the art and the spirit of giving, then it will happen sooner," said the cheerful giver.

And how does Michelle strike a balance between making movies and doing charity work? "Both are very important for me; they go hand in hand.

I work with incredible people and they help me feel the pulse of the subject matter, so I am able to do both," she replied.

Understandably though, Michelle admits that the greatest challenge is trying to do all the things she needs to and cares about. Her supporters in Asia, Europe and the US are all clamouring for more of her. It certainly doesn't help that her family is in Ipoh and her beau, executive director of Ferrari's Formula One team, Jean Todt, is based in France.

Yet optimism, it seems, may be Michelle's secret to success. "I'm very blessed that I have a job that isn't really a job. It's a career, it's a passion! I keep finding stories, characters and people to work with, dedicated filmmakers who love what they do. It's our gift to the world because we make dreams come true. We make realities; we give a sense of enjoyment, and an escape from the sometimes harsh realities of the world. It's such a privilege, so I want to do more."

Asian beauty, personified

At 48, Michelle has come a long way since hanging up those ballet shoes. This is a star with an innate ability to charm and attract followers the world over. Michelle Yeoh has firmly established herself as an iconic Asian beauty in show business and more than that, her heart of gold has illuminated the beauty of her soul in helping the voiceless and broken.

At the end of the day, this global citizen chooses to return to her roots. "Malaysia is always my home. Even though I am a citizen of the world, I am very much an Ipoh girl. Family and friends always keep me grounded because they remind me of where I come from." She concluded, "Everyday is a gift, live for love and enjoy life." ▲