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Lewis Tan Is Ready for the Spotlight

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The dashing ‘Mortal Kombat’ star on bleeding for his craft, shattering Hollywood stereotypes and loving the journey

By GIL MACIAS

Photographed by CHARLOTTE RUTHERFORD

STYLE

Lewis Tan is everything you'd want in a leading man. Handsome, tall and talented, he exudes confidence and sophisticated sex appeal. He loves jazz and scotch. The camera loves him. So it's a pleasurable surprise to discover that behind his worldly exterior, he's also a *tiny* bit of a nerd.

"Hey, that's Noob Saibot! Cool shirt," he says as I enter the downtown L.A. studio for his PLAYBOY photo shoot. Soon the 34-year-old actor is snapping pics of my tee and we're geeking out about *Mortal Kombat*, in which wraith Noob Saibot is a much-loved video-game character.

For those who aren't familiar with the franchise, one of its more memorable sound bites feels apt: "It's official, *you suck!*" Famed for its hyperviolence and blood-spurting finishing moves known as "fatalities," *Mortal Kombat* has spawned more than 10 follow-up games as well as comic books, a card game and both animated and live-action films, the latest of which opens April 23 and stars Tan as Cole Young. Young is a mixed-martial-arts fighter and a brand-new character to the *Mortal Kombat* universe, a fact that set off waves of fan speculation. Could Young somehow be from the same lineage as Sub-Zero? Or Scorpion? Or a different legacy character in a new form?





“Some theories are really far off, and others make me a little nervous,” Tan says about the fan conjecture he’s run across so far. “One of the beautiful things about the franchise is they keep creating these new characters that end up becoming classics. So give Cole Young a shot.”

Plenty of fans seem ready to do just that. When the *Mortal Kombat* Red Band trailer debuted this February, it shattered records, garnering more than 116 million views in just four days. So just who is Lewis Tan, the actor who helped deal this “fatality” to the previous record-holding films?

Born in Manchester, England, Tan is the son of fashion model Joanne Cassidy and Philip Tan, a martial arts champ turned Hollywood stunt coordinator.

“I’m definitely a mix of both of them,” Tan chuckles. “I started modeling and doing martial arts when I was young.”

“ When I say ‘all the shit I’ve been through,’ I mean roles I’ve gotten close to and lost because the studio just couldn’t see an Asian guy being the lead.”

It was his father’s career that led the family to move to Los Angeles when Lewis was a toddler; his dad had been hired as a fight choreographer on Tim Burton’s *Batman*, one of the first blockbuster franchise action series. “Warner Bros. essentially started my father in this industry,” Tan says. “Now I’m leading a Warner Bros. franchise action film.” To recognize “the crazy full circle” of it all, Tan flew his dad out to Australia so he could watch his son act.

“He sat in my chair on set,” Tan says. “My father is not an outwardly emotional guy, but I could tell he was moved. He had a really hard early life and had to sacrifice a lot to get to where he is. And to see him watching me perform was great. He was really proud. And that meant more to me than anything I’ve done up to this moment.”

Tan also has the esteem of Simon McQuoid, director of the *Mortal Kombat* reboot.

“Lewis is an incredibly gifted martial arts fighter. That’s something that comes from years of training,” McQuoid said during a press roundtable. “I needed his fighting ability to feel really real and brutal.”





Cape and pant by Salvatore Ferragamo.



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Indeed, the actors assembled for *Mortal Kombat*—including Ludi Lin, Joe Taslim, Max Huang, Tadanobu Asano and Hiroyuki Sanada—bring extremely high-level physical skill sets to the table, as well as intangible assets. “Simon McQuoid and producers Todd Garner and James Wan made it very clear that we were going to do these *Mortal Kombat* characters justice, by both race and skill,” Tan says. “Joe Taslim, who plays Sub-Zero, is part Chinese and does all his own fights. We banged each other up quite a bit. I bled for *Mortal Kombat* quite a few times. There’s an authenticity level there that people haven’t seen before and they’ve been craving it and been very vocal about it.”

The film is a major moment for Tan, who with Cole Young finally landed the breakthrough role he’d been yearning for, but it also has broader significance. With nine of the 11 primary cast members people of color, perhaps *Mortal Kombat* will prove a turning point for Hollywood as well.

“It’s a huge moment for representation for Asian people, for Asian kids,” says Tan. And in terms of his own career, it’s been a long time coming. “All the shit that I’ve been through led to me getting to this point. When I say ‘all the shit I’ve been through,’ I mean roles I’ve gotten close to and lost because the studio just couldn’t see an Asian guy being the lead yet.”

Back in 2017, Tan nearly landed the lead role of Danny Rand in Netflix’s Marvel series *Iron Fist*. Instead, he was offered a one-episode role as a secondary villain, and the titular role went to *Game of Thrones* alum Finn Jones. In the original comics, Rand is white, but fans saw it as a major missed opportunity to cast an Asian actor and unloaded their displeasure on social media.

A photograph of actor Lewis Tan, shown from the waist up, holding a long, dark sword horizontally across his chest. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt with a subtle pattern. The background is a dark, textured wall with vertical lines and some lighting effects. The overall tone is dramatic and cinematic.

Meet Ass-Kicking Actor Lewis Tan

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Iron Fist wasn't Tan's only Marvel heartbreak. In 2019 he revealed he was neck-and-neck with Simu Liu to be the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first lead Asian male superhero in this year's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. When Liu won out, Tan sent him congratulations. "Simu is going to do a great job with [*Shang-Chi*] and I look forward to seeing it, so it's a win either way," he reflects. "As much as I invested in that role, destiny and fate had other plans. I accept that. What is meant to be mine will be mine, and I will make it incredible."

To Tan, it's all water under the bridge.

After all, he's had plenty of major credits, from his roles as Gaius Chau in AMC's *Into the Badlands*, to Lu Xin Lee in Netflix's *Wu Assassins*, to Shatterstar in *Deadpool 2*. Tan chooses instead to focus on the future, and right now that means taping scenes for *Fistful of Vengeance*, the feature-film follow-up to *Wu Assassins*. Tan describes it as "a crazy action film, not just with martial arts, but guns, boats, motorbikes, cars, all sorts of crazy stuff—it's a very ambitious project." He's also developing plans for a much more personal project—a film about his father's life.



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And of course there's *Mortal Kombat*. Should the film score at the box office what would be called in the *Mortal Kombat* universe a "flawless victory," Tan could be reprising Cole Young in countless sequels to come. Naturally, the possibility has occurred to him. "There's so many cool characters and interesting storylines to explore," he says. "Two or three films down the line, we could have our *Avengers*-like movie where all the *Mortal Kombat* characters come together in one crazy friggin' film. I love that."

Tan emerges from the studio dressing room looking dashing in a silken, pearl-white Saint Laurent shirt, Dunhill black pants, bare feet and a chromatic Valentino waistband cinched around his midsection. He inspects a table strewn with prop weapons—nunchackus, blackjacks, blades—and after a moment's hesitation selects a long sword. He begins a series of fluid poses with the katana, gracefully whirling as he segues into new stances with ease.

"I don't do this for everyone," he says. If it seems like an offhand comment, it's not—but more on that later.



Suit by Missoni.

Throughout the six-and-a-half-hour shoot, Tan sports a total of five looks, from a snappy plaid suit by Missoni to a more flamboyant blazer-and-dress-pants combo by Dunhill. He smolders for the camera and banters with the crew between setups, talking movies and music. He jokes about PLAYBOY, “I told my mum you guys would have me wearing nothing but a sock.” He never complains.

At one point, he hops on a trampoline and goes airborne wearing a black leather cape by Salvatore Ferragamo, posing with each jump and nailing shot after shot, dazzling the crew with his poised agility. The last get-up of the day sees Tan in a form-fitting lavender turtleneck by Versace that he says reminds him of Brad Pitt’s famed October 1999 *Rolling Stone* cover shoot, for which Pitt donned a dress.

“That’s a good example of what I think masculinity is,” Tan says. “I think being vulnerable is courageous. Being sensitive to others is courageous—that’s a masculine trait to me. For a long time, people considered closed-off men to be masculine. But to

me that just means you haven't faced whatever shit you need to deal with, or you haven't come to terms with who you are. If I feel like wearing pink, you better believe I'm going to wear pink."

“ I fucking *love* martial arts. It's the greatest form of expression.”

Identity is something Tan has thought about quite a bit, in part because of his own heritage (he identifies as half Chinese and half British) and his experiences trying to forge a career in an industry notoriously built on stereotypes. “I would go into the room and they'd be like, ‘Ah, you're white.’ I'm like, ‘No, I'm not white.’ And in America, I'm seen as 100 percent Asian,” Tan says. “I want to get to the point where I don't have to say I'm a half-Asian actor or I'm an Asian actor—I'm just an actor.”

Tan has grown passionate and vocal about diversity in Hollywood, and about equality in general. When protests broke out in Los Angeles over the police killing of George Floyd, Tan felt he had to join the marchers on the ground, later meeting with organizers to see how he could help. “It was just instinctual. To me, it was about humanity.”

Though he's grateful for the career he's built, Tan remains fully conscious of racism in Hollywood and the dangers of being pigeon-holed as “just” a martial-arts actor—hence his split-second hesitation over posing with the katana. “Those images are powerful, but I have to do them sparingly and use them at the right time,” he says. “You don't want to be redundant in the way that you are seen. Now is a good moment because it's iconic, it's Playboy. If it feels right, then I am going to do it, but I want to push further and do different things.”

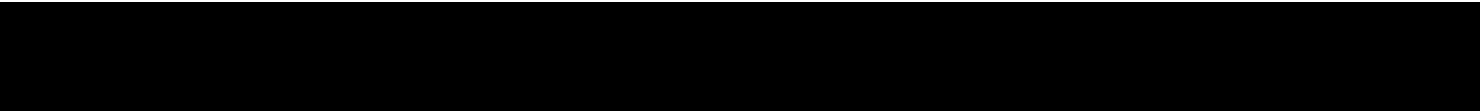


Shirt by Saint Laurent; waistband by Valentino; pant by Dunhill.





Shirt by Louis Vuitton; blazer and pant by Dunhill; shoes by Burberry.



Dramas, romantic comedies, thrillers—Tan hopes someday to land roles in all of the above. (If no one else has yet suggested it, let us be the first: Lewis Tan as the next James Bond. He matches Connery for swagger and Brosnan for sensuality and bests Craig’s respectable build.) Still, he has no plans to abandon his passion.

“I fucking *love* martial arts. It’s the greatest form of expression. It’s ballet, it’s dance—it’s universal. And it’s stunning to capture that on camera, which is why I do those films and I’ll continue to do them,” Tan says. “But at the same time, don’t put me in that box!”

Doors are finally opening, Tan points out. *Parasite*’s win for best picture at last year’s Oscars brought him to tears, though he wonders why the Academy didn’t recognize the film’s actors with nominations. This year, Steven Yeun’s best-actor nod for *Minari* set another Oscar milestone, but to put things in perspective, Yeun’s achievement marked the first time an Asian American man landed that nomination in the Oscars’ 92-year history. (Tan can’t help but vent about the lack of award recognition for another group dear to his heart: stunt performers. “It’s despicable that there’s no Oscar award for stunts,” he says. “These guys are risking their lives for entertainment.”)

Tan sees the dearth of leading roles for Asian actors, and he hopes that with *Mortal Kombat* he can deal a fatality to old stereotypes and help prove that establishing new norms will pay off for studios.

“Leading a film like *Mortal Kombat* is an experience I’ll never forget. But the struggle to get there is the beautiful part,” he says. “When you’re a young up-and-coming actor, you hate that you haven’t made it yet—you hate it and you despise it, but sit in those feelings. Enjoy them, because they’re going to make you *you*. It’s going to make you strong. The journey is where the beauty is, and it’s all good.”



Shirt by Versace; pants by Versace, Louis Vuitton.

Grooming by Sonia Lee; wardrobe styling by Jordan Boothe; videography by Jan Lim.



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