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Keywords
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Keywords: Taiwanese cinema, Taiwanese comedies, Chinese exhibition, *Tropical Fish, You Are the Apple of My Eye, the Wonderful Wedding, Our Times*

Introduction

While all film genres are equally economic and cultural categories, comedy is arguably one of the more 'local' in nature. Yet how 'local' depends on multiple economic and political factors. In Taiwan, for example, roughly one in seven films made between 1949 and 1994 were comedies, according to Lu Fei-yi. Yet the peak for comedies was in 1968 and 1969, after which the numbers plummeted in the 1970s.[1] Why this sudden drop in the number of comedies being produced in Taiwan despite the continued rise of a commercial film industry? As it turns out, this precipitous decline mirrored an equally precipitous drop of films made in the Taiwanese dialect: in 1969 there were 113 films made in the local dialect versus only eighteen in 1970; by the end of the 1970s no films were being made in Taiwanese as opposed to Mandarin Chinese.[2] Such strong correlation suggests that in Taiwan, historically speaking, comedy was chiefly a local affair. By stark contrast, however, for current Taiwanese comedies to be economically

viable, local flavour is seemingly being toned down when not completely erased, and not merely in terms of language. Other factors notwithstanding, the core cause is the recent opportunities posed by the astronomical growth of the mainland Chinese market.

One film made between the 1960s and the last decade illustrates the changing fate of Taiwanese comedies. *Tropical Fish* (熱帶魚), a directorial debut by Chen Yu-hsun (陳玉勳) from 1995, is a satirical comedy that follows the plight of two young Taiwanese boys who are kidnapped by down-on-their-luck Taiwanese adults so likable that the entire affair turns into a virtual summer vacation. *Tropical Fish* is rife with specific references to the daily life of Taiwan much like many New Cinema films of the 1980s, everything from the food, to the locales, to the music, not to mention the dialogue being primarily in the Taiwanese dialect. This rich local flavour, however, posed no obstacle to the film becoming a cult hit among the few who saw it outside of Taiwan. Nevertheless, to this day this film is mostly overlooked even within Taiwan for one simple reason: in 1995, *Tropical Fish* barely had any market it could service, not even on its home turf of Taiwan where local cinema was undergoing virtual obliteration.

By stark contrast, in the last decade Taiwanese comedies have opportunities unlike any before. Now larger than even North America, the unprecedented development of the mainland Chinese exhibition sector over the last two decades has global implications, affecting even how Hollywood 'tent pole' pictures are now produced and distributed. Even recent comedies from Taiwan such as *You are the Apple of My Eye* (那些年，我們一起追的女孩 2011), *The Big Wedding* (大囍臨門 2015) and *Our Times* (我的少女時代 2015) suggest that the mainland exhibition market is an offer that few Taiwanese filmmakers can easily refuse. Unsurprisingly, appealing to this market comes with both a political and cultural "price," with visible aesthetic and thematic effects on the films themselves. The most successful of the three, *Our Times*,

which made over US$50 million in the mainland market alone, is also the most bleached of any 'local' flavour. This suggests that the term 'Taiwanese comedy' has now become increasingly problematic.

But what exactly has changed for Taiwanese comedies from 1995 to recent years? What has changed in terms of the context in which these films are made, most of all in regards to their intended markets? Given these economic transformations, what exactly has also changed for the films themselves both thematically and stylistically? As the following will hopefully make clear, the three recent commercial successes mentioned above suggest there may still be a range of possible Taiwanese comedic responses to the irresistible pull of China. At the same time, however, comparisons between these recent comedies and *Tropical Fish* suggest that to a varying degree local flavour must be sacrificed to better ensure success in the mainland. Only by looking at the state of both Taiwanese cinema and the Chinese market back in 1995, can we begin to understand how different the situation is for Taiwanese comedies today.

1995: Year of the *Fish*

1995 was a bad year of an even worse decade for Taiwanese cinema in its own market. Only eighteen films produced in Taiwan were among the 154 total releases classified as 'national films' during that year -- the bulk coming from Hong Kong instead. Yet by 1995, Hong Kong's precipitous decline in the Taiwanese market was now in full evidence as well: among those 154 works, almost half did not manage to sell even a thousand tickets in their theatrical runs.[3] 1995 was one of the first years verifying the near total takeover of the Taiwanese market by Hollywood at the expense of films from Hong Kong and Taiwan. According to the annual yearbook, the Hollywood majors only accounted for roughly 1/3 of the total number of films distributed in Taiwan that year,

yet they earned well over 70% of the Taiwanese box office.[4] In 1995 Taiwanese-made films by contrast accounted for only 1.3% of the local box office, versus 15% for Hong Kong made films.

Tropical Fish was released in October of 1995. During its first run, *Tropical Fish* managed to sell just over 29,000 tickets in Taipei, which meant it pulled in only NT$4.6 million box office gross, or roughly little more than US$150,000.[5] Nevertheless, these numbers meant that *Tropical Fish* was a relatively strong performer among 'national' films, an indication of how dire things had become for both Taiwanese and Hong Kong films within Taiwan. By 1999, the situation was even more dismal: the box office figures for Taiwan had dwindled to less than .5% and Hong Kong's share had plummeted to 3%. Meanwhile the Hollywood majors now earned roughly ¾ of the total box office returns within Taiwan.[6] The lesson of the 1990s was manifest: Taiwanese films – what few that were produced to begin with – barely registered on the Taiwanese market. Despite recent improvements and a few exceptions here and there, the sense that Taiwanese films are not actually for Taiwan's market lingers to the present day. The biggest difference now is that there is another much larger market to consider across the Straits of Taiwan.

In the first years of the 1990s, China appeared to be in even worse shape than Taiwan despite its substantial advantage in market size. Yet by 1995 the first of several key reforms towards cinema had already been implemented by the PRC government. Starting in 1994, China began a quota system of importing ten foreign films (i.e. mostly Hollywood films), a key component of a larger plan to salvage a film industry that had been undergoing its worst crisis since the 1950s.[7] In the long run, this and other later reforms would produce epochal changes in global cinema, making China currently the largest unified exhibition market in the world that also matches the highest standards of

the developed world, most of all North America. Hollywood clearly has been a beneficiary of these reforms, yet in the long run so have the government-run distributors who monopolize these film imports, most of all the China Film Group. Further benefitting are state-run and private exhibitors who collectively have produced the greatest theatre building boom in human history.[8] In this larger context even Taiwanese producers have benefitted from these changes on occasion, making it debatable whether a comedy such as *Tropical Fish* would have been made as such today.

Tropical Fish represents a liminal work from a transitional period in Taiwanese cinema. In 1995, exhibition in China was not yet a consideration for a small Taiwanese comedy. This was also long before the commercial mini-resurgence that arguably began with *Cape No. 7*（海角七號）in 2008, after which the occasional Taiwanese genre film could find a sizeable audience even in Taiwan proper. Taiwan was already an established powerhouse in the international realm of film festivals by the 1990s, yet festival luminaires such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang barely registered in Taiwan's domestic box office. Compared to the typical Taiwanese "festival" film of the 1990s, however, *Tropical Fish* is more highly edited and more accessible overall. Yet at times the film resembles the style of the festival/New Cinema films that Taiwan had become known for with numerous distanced shots that are also 100% static. This may have been due to practical considerations, as seen in numerous scenes of the always flooded and cramped house in the fishing village near Chia-yi in southern Taiwan where most of the film's action takes place. As the camera lingers outside with water flooding nearby, inside an open door multiple family members gather for scenes often captured in single, uninterrupted takes – the hallmark of the Taiwanese festival style.

One of the greatest breakthroughs of the Taiwanese New Cinema and its aftermath was its unflinching dedication to capturing the real contours of everyday life in Taiwan, most of all among the average people who are sometimes down on their luck. *Tropical Fish* continues in that same vein, albeit in a more accessible and light-hearted fashion. The main kidnapper played by Lin Cheng-sheng is sympathetic despite being outside of the law and dragging his entire family with him. Living in a typical Taiwanese fishing village, he and his family can barely keep their house above water due to an unspecified drainage problem nearby. (Hysterically, they just keep conducting their normal lives regardless.) Despite the hint of class differences at play between them and the two urban boys, the local fishing family feels bad for having kidnapped the film's protagonist once they realize he might miss the all-important 'lian kao' (聯考), a test that can literally determine a young person's future. As a result, the kind kidnappers provide him with every possible textbook and supplies to make sure he is still ready for his exams. As time progresses, they treat the two boys like family, and the "crime" becomes more and more like a fun summer vacation that includes ample carefree time spent on the beach.

The quotidian details are the most telling in regards to how 'Taiwanese' this film is, whether it be the fish farms, the multiple references to betelnut (a natural stimulant many local blue collar men chew on), the local stand selling a Taiwanese street food called *xian su ji* (鹹酥雞), or another local stand selling Taiwanese-style sausages at which policemen play gambling games. There one officer somehow wins 400 sausages from the vendor, too many for him to eat personally, so that he unwittingly gives some away free to the kidnappers, not realizing that they are kidnappers.

Language is clearest indicator of them all, however. The Taiwanese dialect made a monumental comeback in Taiwanese New Cinema of the 1980s, a development of

political and cultural significance. In *Tropical Fish*, Mandarin is primarily heard only in the few early scenes in the school and in the media reports. The young people speaking among themselves often mix Taiwanese and Mandarin as is common in Taiwan to this day. All the other characters such as the kidnappers, the family, even the police, all converse almost exclusively in Taiwanese with its rich and sometimes bawdy overtones. Even the music for a montage sequence is a Japanese song translated into Taiwanese, a dialect that retains a lot of Japanese words due to the legacy of Japanese colonial rule. This trait alone could have posed potential problems for mainland censors had any attempt been made to show this film in China back in 1995. Of course, no such attempt was made to begin with.

To wit, *Tropical Fish* makes zero effort to disguise that it is a Taiwanese film because it had no reason to. Its ample references to local Taiwanese life caused one local reviewer to say this: 'It does not avoid showing the dirtier and seedier side of local life. Its strong ability to hint at the reality of our lives causes us to notice so many ridiculous things we otherwise do not notice about ourselves, being arranged together as such that you cannot help but smile and laugh.'[9] A decade and a half later, however, things would be radically different, making the local more problematic in the face of now much larger market considerations, and *Tropical Fish* a film of its particular time and place, but not thereafter.

2010 and After: China now the Apple of Taiwan's Eyes?

Perhaps the most monumental recent reforms in global cinema occurred in China during the years 2002 to 2004. The most obvious change was the increase of the foreign film quota from ten films per year to twenty films per year as part of China's entry into the WTO, once again a prime slate of films to be filled by mostly Hollywood blockbusters.

Today that figure has now been increased to 34 total films, all of which are distributed in China by the government-run China Film Group or its subsidiary, Huaxia, on a revenue-sharing basis where the Hollywood firms receive only up to a quarter of the Chinese box office. Another thirty foreign films can be imported via a 'wholesale' arrangement where local distributors pay a flat fee for foreign imports, after which they take on all the risks and costs of distributing the film in China. This second-tier of imports gives private companies a shot at importing films alongside their government counterparts. While more risky on average, this can pay off handsomely when it works out.[10]

As important as increased import quotas are, they pale in comparison to other changes that occurred regarding co-productions and exhibition. Signed in 2003, and first implemented at the beginning of 2004, CEPA (Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) has provided a new door into the Chinese market outside of the annual slot of sixty-four imported films noted above. Aimed at fostering co-productions between mainland companies and those in Hong Kong and Macao, CEPA also provides co-production opportunities for other industries through a Hong Kong/Macao intermediary. This includes players from Taiwan. Although this route comes with numerous economic and political strings attached, it does offer additional possibilities beyond the strictures of the sixty-four imported films, most of all in terms of the share of box office revenue since these are classified as 'domestic' films in the Chinese market.[11]

Even CEPA, however, does not quite match the unprecedented development of the exhibition sector in China over the last decade or so in terms of global significance. According to *Box Office* magazine in March of 2017, just over half of the top thirty-five theatre circuits in the world are currently Chinese-owned, providing over 56% of the

screens among these top thirty-five groups. By far the largest is China's Wanda Group which now owns over 14,000 screens total worldwide after having bought out both AMC and Carmike in North America.[12] Yet within China proper, Wanda is only number four in terms of number of screens owned. In its entirety, China can now boast of over 45,000 screens, marking the first developed exhibition market in history to surpass North America in sheer number of screens.[13] The exponential increase of exhibition spaces in China is part of larger economic trends in China, since it directly ties with the key role real estate now plays in the Chinese economy. Equally important are the hopes of the Chinese government to increase consumerism within China so it can less rely on an export-oriented economy in the future.[14] It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the vast majority of these new "palatial" multiplexes are either at the bottom or top levels of shopping centres in China, of which there are now almost too many to count. For example, the Capital Movie Theatre in Beijing（北京首都电影院）was number three in the entire nation in box office for the week of June 5 -11, 2017.[15] This theatre is located on one of the top floors of a shopping complex, Joy City (大悦城), in the bustling Xidan (西单) area of Beijing that is particularly favoured by young people. Yet Joy City is only one of no less than a half dozen shopping areas that are all located next to each other in the Xidan district.

The sheer scope of the Chinese exhibition market, which is still growing as these words are being written, exerts gravitational forces throughout the globe. Taiwan, however, is a special case given its cultural, linguistic and economic ties with China that have long been at odds with real political divisions. Taiwan's situation somewhat resembles the perpetually ambivalent status of British cinema in the face of Hollywood's might, where the British industry almost becomes a subsidiary operation for Hollywood. In early 2013, Stephen Cremin in *Film Business Asia* argues that every

Taiwanese filmmaker now faces a Hobson's choice: either remain 'south' in Taiwan and make very low-budget films that have only local flavour and limited box office appeal, or go 'north' and aim for bigger budgets and audiences in China proper via co-productions.[16] Even a festival luminary such as Hou Hsiao-hsien had to consider the Chinese market to justify the budgetary outlays for *The Assassin* in 2015. The budget for this arty *wuxia* film came in at around US$15 million, by far the most expensive film Hou has ever made. The economic risks involved forced Hou to bank on mainland China for both locations and money: half of the budget came from Chinese sources, while the rest came from Taiwan, South Korea, Canada and Europe.[17] As a co-production, this was the first Hou film to be released in mainland theatres. Hou defends himself on economic grounds, pointing out that the size of Taiwan's market is less than half the size of France's, but the size of France only equals that of Fujian Province in China. He credits Hollywood for long having a head start in a well-coordinated banking and financial infrastructure coupled with a large unified market. But should China ever do the same, he adds, it could one day match Hollywood given the sheer size of that market.[18]

No wonder then that the makers of Taiwanese genre films invariably must also consider the mainland market today, unlike in the past. One of the clearest indications of Taiwanese commercial filmmakers now going 'north' is the 2010 Kung Fu comedy, *Just Call Me Nobody* (大笑江湖), directed by Kevin Chu Yen-ping. Albeit on a much smaller scale, Chu is in many ways Taiwan's version of Luc Besson: just as Besson rejects all forms of subsidies in France while making commercial fare, Chu has defied the norms of Taiwan's signature 'festival' style since the 1980s, including frequent criticism of Taiwan's own system of government subsidies. During a time when barely any commercial cinema has existed in Taiwan, Chu has sometimes managed a modicum

of commercial success with low-budgeted, bawdy comedies set in Taiwan that resort to broad humour. *Just Call Me Nobody* represents a monumental shift, however, since Taiwan is nowhere to be found. A co-production with Beijing Poly-Bona shot in China, this was a clear attempt to conquer the mainland market with the male lead played by a mainland actor, Xiao Shen-yang, while the female lead is played by Kelly Lin from Taiwan. The film clearly modelled itself on Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* from 2005, the key breakthrough in the mainland market for Hong Kong's most notable comedic star: not only does *Just Call Me Nobody* use CGI for similar cartoonish effects and make references to obscure Kung Fu manuals, at one point the film even has a giant footprint in the ground. Despite being lambasted by critics, and despite evidence that this was not a low-budgeted film for a comedy, the film managed to earn US$23 million in the mainland box office alone, as opposed to only US$ 36,000 in Taiwan. [19]

By comparison, a small-budgeted comedy such as *Night Market Hero* (雞排英雄, 2011) can arguably afford to remain 'south.' Yet even in that film there is evidence of appealing to China with a scene involving mainland tourists happily visiting Taiwan's unique night market culture. Nevertheless, the film never found a market in the mainland, remaining firmly ensconced in the 'south' (i.e. Taiwan). Instead it would be another 2011 film that would soon break box office records in China for a Taiwanese-made film.

You Are the Apple of My Eye did not take the alternative CEPA route through a Hong Kong partnership. It was instead a co-production of Star Ritz Productions in Taiwan and the Taiwanese division of Sony Music Entertainment. This suggests that the film was originally intended strictly for the Taiwanese market, where it paid off handsomely. According to the spotty statistics, *Apple* made no less than US$17 million in Taiwan and US$24 million total when you include Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore

and South Korea.[20] Other sources, however, note that the film made a total of US$34 million worldwide.[21] The bulk of that additional US$10 million definitely came from the mainland market, where the film reportedly pulled in an RMB 50 million, beating the previous record of RMB 35 million set by *Cape No. 7* in 2008 for 100% Taiwanese-made films.[22] Remarkably, within mainland China itself the film was distributed by none other than the China Film Group, in all likelihood on a flat-fee (i.e. "wholesale") basis since by 2011 that import market proved to be a sometimes lucrative option that even a SOE (State-Owned-Enterprise) could not resist. In any case, the Taiwanese romantic comedy proved how even a small genre film could now reap huge dividends across the Taiwan Straits.

By contrast, *The Wonderful Wedding* is a co-production between the mainland's Huayi Brothers and two production companies in Taiwan, Full Picture Entertainment and Shine Picture Arts.[23] Moreover, the opening credits list roughly a dozen other partners involved in this film such as the Hong Kong company, Orient Digital Entertainment Limited (東方數字娛樂有限公司), indicating that this is ultimately a CEPA-brokered partnership. Despite being distributed by Huayi Brothers, a notable Chinese media player whose name even appears on the occasional Hollywood film, this film managed to earn only RMB 7.8 million in China, or barely over US$ 1 million.[24] This is in stark contrast to its performance in Taiwan itself, where it is among the all-time box office champs for films produced in Taiwan. According to one source, the film earned NT$200 Million in Taiwan, which is around RMB 40 million. This means the Taiwanese gross was roughly five times that of the gross in the mainland market.[25]

If a new box office standard has been set for Taiwanese comedies in the mainland market, that now clearly belongs to *Our Times'* stupendous performance in 2015. *Our Times* was also facilitated by CEPA, since the two main production

companies listed are Hualian Media International, a Taiwanese firm, and Focus Films, a Hong Kong company.[26] Its box office gross in Taiwan was nearly identical to that of *You Are the Apple of My Eye* four years earlier, reportedly somewhere around NT$400 million, which translates into roughly RMB80 million and over US$13 million.[27] Once again, however, it is the prowess of the China Film Group as the Chinese distributor that most paid dividends for this film: *Our Times* pulled in no less than RMB 359 million, or over US$50 million in China alone.[28] This means the gross figures in the mainland market were not merely four times more than those for Taiwan, they were also at least *five* times that of the mainland gross for *Apple* from 2011, and *fifty* times that for *The Wonderful Wedding* also in 2015. The disparity in the box office performances in the mainland market of these three films becomes even more significant after considering the textual differences.

Textual Strategies of Recent Taiwanese Comedies

Given that these three recent comedies are commercial ventures, there are many textual strategies that come as little surprise. Two of the films (*You Are the Apple of My Eye* and *Our Times*) rely heavily on the romantic tropes of Japanese "idol dramas" using young stars, which makes them potentially appealing to multiple markets in East Asia. *The Wonderful Wedding*, on the other hand, is largely a star vehicle based on the familiar antics of Zhu Geliang – familiar that is to Taiwanese audiences, but not yet in mainland China. But for our purposes here, the core issue is 'local flavour': compared to *Tropical Fish* from 1995, all three recent Taiwanese comedies have toned that down to varying degrees. *The Wonderful Wedding* retains the most local traits due to its ample use of the Taiwanese dialect; *Our Times* by stark contrast is almost entirely bleached of anything Taiwanese save for a few incidental details; *You Are the Apple of My Eye* falls

somewhere in between largely because this is a semi-autobiographical tale of the Taiwanese director, Giddens Ko. While direct causation cannot be proven from such a small sample size, one could argue from this that the stronger the local cultural 'odour' in a Taiwanese film, the less likely it will succeed in the mainland market as well.

The truth is certainly more complicated than this. Even *Tropical Fish* centres on themes that could have been easily marketable in the mainland market as well: student life is an indelible feature of Asian youth in general, and Taiwan's *liankao* exams are the equivalent of the mainland's *gaokao* (高考), an arduous and excruciating experience for any student growing up in a Confucian society. Likewise, both *Apple* and *Our Times* are sentimental takes on friendships formed during one's gruelling school years, a theme that is just as relatable to mainland audiences. *The Wonderful Wedding* focuses on a different but equally relatable theme: the hassles involved in getting married in Chinese society. Yet despite these more universal themes, the correlation between degrees of local flavour and overall box office success is the likely lesson those in the film industry will take from these three notable examples when analysing their varying degrees of box office success.

Not surprisingly, the most conspicuously absent detail in the three recent examples is the official flag still used in Taiwan, namely the red, white and blue flag of the old Republic of China that had once been the government of China itself. At one school rally in *Tropical Fish*, the ROC flag is seen above a portrait of Sun Yat-sen, a merely incidental detail for a Taiwanese film from 1995. Of the three recent comedies, however, only *Apple* includes one shot of a portrait of Sun Yat-sen, since Sun is the one political figure revered by both the communists and the nationalists. But nowhere in *Apple*, *Wedding* or *Our Times* does one ever see the official ROC flag itself, not to mention the alternative green and white flag that Taiwanese nationalists favour instead.

In general, all three films represent a virtual political whitewash as if politics does not even exist. Of the three films, *The Wonderful Wedding* arguably had the greatest opportunity to make political commentary since the entire focus of the film is on a wedding between a mainland man and a Taiwanese woman. Yet the film completely elides the political, instead focusing entirely on how different Taiwanese and Northern Chinese (in this case Manchurians) are, repeatedly playing these differences up for broad humour. Unlike in *Tropical Fish*, there is no sense of class differences or down on their luck characters – both families are quite well off by all appearances, albeit the mainland clan appear to be actual millionaires many times over. Thus, instead of disparities of class or politics, everything revolves around disparities of customs. For example, at one point the future mainland son-in-law flips a fish at a Taiwanese dinner table, something taboo in Taiwan for those associated with the fishing industry, since this represents the flipping of a boat at sea. There are also numerous misunderstandings about different marriage customs: the Taiwanese believe that one cannot sit on the marriage bed on the wedding day before the ceremony without becoming ill, while the mainlanders believe the opposite; the mainlanders believe all the nuts left on the bed represent good fortune, not a snack to be eaten at any time by wedding guests. Particular emphasis is placed on how differently the two sides handle money in relation to marriage, most of all the *pinjin* (聘金), the traditional money provided by the groom's family to the bride's family to signify the joining of two clans on the day of the engagement. Once again, the issue in this film is neither class nor politics – the issue is always differences of customs and nothing more.

Given how much the film focuses on both sides of the straits, why then did this film fare so much better in Taiwan than on the mainland? One key reason is that *The Wonderful Wedding* ultimately is a star vehicle for Zhu Geliang, a comedic figure in

Taiwan long known for his ability to make outrageous puns in the Taiwanese dialect. (Being only a Mandarin speaker, I watched this film with a speaker of the Taiwanese dialect who laughed at multiple things I completely missed.) There were a few attempts to produce puns that are translatable in Mandarin as well. The word for 'Manchurian' in Mandarin, for example, happens to be a homonym for 'satisfied.' At one point the Taiwanese daughter pleads with his father that her fiancé is a Manchurian from Beijing.' The father (played by Zhu Geliang) responds: 'Satisfied? He may be satisfied, but I'm not satisfied!' Yet the fact remains that too much is lost in translation across the straits in this case, leading one mainland critic to comment on how the disparity in box office between Taiwan and the mainland only proves how different the two places are. This review further adds, 'Although this film was a co-production across the Taiwan Straits, it mostly reflects the local flavour and tastes of Taiwan.'[29] As such, this strategy of comparing local differences between Taiwan and mainland China may be limited in potential in the Chinese market.

Both *You Are the Apple of My Eye* and *Our Times*, on the other hand, suggest a winning strategy that will likely be copied again soon. Both are romantic comedies about romances that began in school, a situation that is transferable to just about anywhere in Asia, as noted before. Moreover, both feature young stars, not an older star such as Zhu Geliang, appealing more directly to a primary theatre-going demographic. Both also display that Asian proclivity to have somewhat more loosely structured romance stories than one would normally find from Hollywood, even if there always remains a core chain of causality. At the same time, both also suggest two distinct variations on that same strategy. Of the two works, *Apple* is the more realistic and serious film (more of a comedy/drama than a straight comedy) with heartfelt and effective performances from its endearing romantic leads. *Our Times*, on the other hand,

is zanier and more prone to exaggeration on occasion. The most notable difference, however, lies in how much Taiwan itself is visible in the respective films.

The dialogue in *Apple* is mostly in Mandarin with only a few moments where Taiwanese is spoken. However, the film still makes explicit when and where various events occur, starting in Chang Hua in 1994, and then in Hsin Chu after 1997. The most touching scene occurs in 1999 during the devastating earthquake that had struck Taiwan: although they had long broken up and now at separate colleges, and had not spoken to each other for two years, Ko-teng (the male lead) desperately tries to call Chia-yi (the female lead) to make sure she is okay. Other references specific to Taiwan are in evidence as well, such as images of the boys practicing at a baseball batting cage, something one would not find on the mainland where baseball remains a largely unknown sport.

Our Times supposedly takes place in the 1990s as well, yet by stark contrast there is no clear indication of where exactly this film is taking place other than at a generically named high school. Aside from traditional Chinese characters, a brief mention of Taiwan University and an image of Taiwan Beer (clearly the result of product placement as the closing credits prove), it is very easy for any viewer to forget that this is indeed a Taiwanese film. In other words, *Our Times* is literally both a genre film and a generic film. More importantly, while taking the safest route of the three recent Taiwanese comedies, it also paid off the most in terms of the mainland box office. This fact cannot be lost in any future considerations for Taiwanese comedies and their prospects in the mainland market.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that recent textual changes in Taiwanese comedies are the result of larger contextual factors that are primarily economic in nature, yet with some political undertones as well. Back in 1995 when the overlooked *Tropical Fish* first came out, there was no market on the other side of the Straits of Taiwan for any Taiwanese director to consider; in fact, there was barely a market in Taiwan to consider. Today, the prospects for an occasional genre film such as comedy are much brighter. Even Chen Yu-hsun has shifted his focus to the mainland market with the quirky comedy, *The Village of No Return* (健忘村, 2017), a co-production that involves both Wanda Pictures in China and even the Taiwanese division of Warner Bros., among others. The film reportedly earned over US$1 million in Taiwan[30] and another US$2 million in mainland China,[31] numbers that were inconceivable back in 1995 when Chen's *Tropical Fish* was released. Yet even these numbers are decidedly modest compared to other recent Taiwanese comedies. A successful Taiwanese comedy can now pull in over US$10 million in Taiwan alone if everything lines up. Yet in the mainland market, a Taiwanese comedy can possibly pull in over five times that amount, as happened with *Our Times* in 2015.

This is the result of one of the most astounding developments in global cinema over the last two decades, namely the meteoric rise of the exhibition sector in China, now the largest in the world in terms of total number of screens, and will likely soon be the largest in total revenue as well. While Hollywood is clearly a primary beneficiary of this growth, recent Taiwanese comedies prove that Taiwan is uniquely positioned – geographically, culturally and linguistically – to also take advantage of this opportunity. Yet for those interested in how 'local' comedy can be as a genre, as was the focus here, recent Taiwanese comedies suggest there is a price to be paid as well. The stupendous success of *Our Times* easily insinuates that the more one bleaches the film of any

Taiwanese ‘odour,’ the more one can succeed in the mainland market. That is the obvious lesson to be taken when comparing this film to *The Wonderful Wedding*; it is also a conclusion that could be drawn by just comparing *Our Times* with *You Are the Apple of My Eye*.

However, the underlying truth may not be that simple. For starters, it is striking how much cachet Taiwan has in mainland China today, and even in the capital of Beijing one finds numerous Taiwanese restaurants and Taiwanese tea shops that are quite popular among the locals. Second, the humour of *The Wonderful Wedding* is heavily reliant on verbal puns in the Taiwanese dialect, a factor that immediately limits its appeal elsewhere. Moreover, its star is much older than the stars in the other two films, which further limits its appeal to a younger demographic that is most likely to patronize movie theatres. The cult status of *Tropical Fish* meanwhile shows how a film with strong local flavour can still be funny to audiences elsewhere, since its humour is more situational than strictly verbal in nature. Had it ever gotten the opportunity, it is possible that even *Tropical Fish* could have intrigued and appealed to audiences in the mainland. After all, *Cape No.* 7, a Taiwanese film that retains a lot of local colour, did quite well in the mainland market in 2008. Finally, one cannot simply conclude that *Our Times* made five times as much as *Apple* in the mainland market simply because it eradicated almost everything specifically ‘Taiwanese.’ A key factor to consider is that *Our Times* was released in 2015, not 2011, and the growth of the mainland exhibition market over those four years was exponential, not incremental.

Unfortunately, that is not the lesson that industry heads will likely take from all this; rather the likely conclusion that many will take is that the more generic route of *Our Times* is now the safest bet, and the next hit Taiwanese comedy on the mainland will likely be just as bleached of local flavour, if not more so. That scenario is likely to

continue until one day another risk is taken, and a new *Tropical Fish* emerges that is rife with current Taiwanese flavour, and for whatever reason delights millions in China as well, in a market that is unlike any before in human history.

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