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# Dust in the Wind: A Definitive Hou/New Cinema Work

## **Abstract**

**Book Summary:** For younger critics and audiences, Taiwanese cinema enjoys a special status, comparable with that of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave for earlier generations, a cinema that was and is in the midst of introducing an innovative sensibility and a fresh perspective. Hou Hsiao-hsien is the most important Taiwanese filmmaker working today, and his sensuous, richly nuanced films reflect everything that is vigorous and genuine in contemporary film culture. By combining multiple forms of tradition with a uniquely cinematic approach to space and time, Hou has created a body of work that, through its stylistic originality and historical gravity, opens up new possibilities for the medium.

**Chapter Summary:** This chapter is part of the latest anthology devoted to Taiwan's most famous director, Hou Hsiao-hsien. It argues that the lesser known *Dust in the Wind* is a definitive work for both Hou and the New Cinema movement that made him famous.

## **Keywords**

Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwanese cinema, film critique

## **Disciplines**

Chinese Studies | East Asian Languages and Societies | Film and Media Studies

## *Dust in the Wind*

*A Definitive Hou/New Cinema Work*

In the illustrious career of Hou Hsiao-hsien, *Dust in the Wind* (1986) is arguably the most overlooked film. In some respects, of course, this film failed to match its predecessors and successors. Both of the first two feature length projects Hou completed during Taiwan's New Cinema period – *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983) and *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984) – received the Golden Montgolfiere, the top prize at the Festival of Three Continents in Nantes, marking the true beginning of Hou's dazzling film festival career. As a result of these successes, Hou's next film *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (1985) was screened at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1986, where it won a special prize in the Forum section.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later, in 1989, *A City of Sadness* earned a stunning triumph with a Golden Lion at Venice, proving that Hou and Taiwanese cinema had now reached the acme of the international festival world. *The Puppetmaster* then became the first Taiwanese film to be entered in the competition at Cannes in 1993, where it won a Jury Prize. In terms of festival success, *Dust in the Wind* also could not match another masterwork to come out of Taiwan in 1986: Edward Yang's *The Terrorizers*. That film at least came away with the Silver Leopard at Locarno, despite intense political pressure on

the festival from the PRC and the USSR to exclude it.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, *Dust in the Wind* "merely" made a return to the Festival of Three Continents. While it managed to receive citations for Best Director, Best Cinematography and Best Music, Hou was not eligible for the Golden Montgolfiere because *Dust in the Wind* was shown outside of the competition. *Dust in the Wind* also failed to attract a sizeable domestic audience, a fate by then familiar to most New Cinema films, Hou's and Yang's included. It did nothing to allay the increasing criticisms of those who claimed that Hou was abandoning

- 1) In the 1980s, the "Big Three" Festivals (Cannes, Venice and Berlin) were especially skittish about showing films from Taiwan for geopolitical reasons. Probably out of fear of being passed over for films by the Fifth Generation in mainland China, they did not want to antagonize the People's Republic of China which was trying everything to prevent Taiwan from gaining international recognition as the Republic of China. Berlin had invited Hou to show two films outside of the competition in 1985, but then withdrew the invitation for unspecified reasons. After Hou won at Nantes two years in a row, the big festivals clearly decided they could no longer afford not to show films from Taiwan, but they were presented in the non-competitive sidebars. Venice finally took the plunge in 1989 by entering *A City of Sadness* in the competition. This changed the course of Taiwanese cinema, making it a true festival powerhouse in the 1990s.
- 2) Edward Yang, "We are Lonely Runners on a Marathon," *Long Take*, Number 3 (October 1987), 17–19



*Dust in the Wind, 1986*

his own audiences in favor of a foreign festival crowd. This should have been discouraging for Hou, who at the time claimed that festival success meant little to him, and that it was meaningless to make films that his own fellow citizens refused to see.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it is not clear that *Dust in the Wind* was the film Hou most wanted to make at the time; he was toying with three different ideas, including a never realized project to be made with funding from Germany's Channel 2 [ZDF] and another that eventually became *A City of Sadness*. Hou only decided to make *Dust in the Wind* on the advice of one of his most trusted advisors, Chan Hung-chih.<sup>4</sup>

If the film has been so overlooked, how can the claim here be that *Dust in the Wind* is nevertheless the "definitive" work by Hou, and of the New Cinema as a whole, when so many other Hou films seem to have garnered more attention? The answer lies largely in the aesthetics. The formal features of this one film come closest to fitting the various definitions used for Hou's films, the New Cinema as a movement, and even Taiwanese cinema as a whole. Moreover, most of the films made in the style of Asian art cinema from the 1990s onwards that has been described as "Asian Minimalism," a style Hou is largely responsible for

giving birth to, could have easily used *Dust in the Wind* as their primer. Put another way, *Dust in the Wind* marks the aesthetic culmination of the most definitive and cohesive period of Hou's career, thus forming the bedrock for the most formative movement in Taiwan's cinematic history. Much like Hou's career, the film's influence did not die out when the movement officially ended in early 1987, nor was that influence contained within Taiwan's borders.

#### DEFINING A NEW / NATIONAL CINEMA

Defining any national cinema, or even a notable movement within that national cinema, is fraught with conceptual difficulties. However, define we must. In the case of the New Cinema in Taiwan, one cohesive definition came from Chen Ru-shou in *The Historical-Cultural Experiences of Taiwan New Cinema*. Three of the more salient traits Chen lists – long takes, a static camera, history filtered through the personal memories of ordinary people – are better used to describe Hou's films than Edward Yang's films, or those of the movement as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Yang did use a static camera in many shots in *The Terrorizers*, but, on average, his shots were much shorter in duration (roughly fourteen seconds) than those in *Dust in the Wind* (thirty-three seconds). *The Terrorizers* is also set en-

tirely in the present, unlike *Dust in the Wind*, which takes place in the early 1970s. The only New Cinema director who did match Hou in terms of shot duration is Chang Yi. Indeed, Chang's *Kuei-mei, A Woman* (1985) has a higher average shot length than Hou's *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, but he was far less successful than Hou in his use of *static* long takes, largely because he was not able to stage his shots with anywhere near the complexity or intricacy that Hou was already showing signs of.

The New Cinema is usually said to have ended in 1987. Early in that year, nearly every major participant in the movement from filmmakers to critics published a joint statement requesting the government support "another kind of cinema." Never again would this group

act in such a collective manner, and many would never make another film. However, some argue that the movement continued through the subsequent careers of Hou and Yang. There is one crucial difference between the two: Edward Yang edited more, and had less influence; Hou was the true long take master, everyone knew it, and many followed his path. What is undeniable is that Taiwanese cinema thereafter became largely identified with the long take *and* the static camera, and not everyone was pleased. In 1995, for example, Huang Ying-fen lashed out at the "festival style" that Taiwanese filmmakers then aspired to since there was no local market as it was. Huang's definition of that style can essentially be reduced to *long takes coupled with a static camera*.<sup>6</sup> David Bordwell has described this long take tendency as an "identifying tag" of the New Cinema in the 1980s which then became a "national brand" in the 1990s. Moreover, this did not remain a strictly national style, since it spread throughout Asia, "making 'Asian Minimalism' a festival cliché by the end of the 1990s."<sup>7</sup> Soon, there were examples of directors utilizing the static, long take in Japan, South Korea and even mainland China: Koreeda Hirokazu's *Maborosi* (1995), Lee Kwang-mo's *Spring in My Home Town* (1998), Wang Chao's

3) Chu Tien-wen, "Hou Hsiao-hsien's Choice" in Chu and Wu Nien-jen, *Dust in the Wind*, New Edition (Taipei: Yuan-liou Publishing Company, 1992), 17–18

4) *Ibid.*, 15, 22

5) Chen Ru-shou, *The Historical-Cultural Experiences of Taiwan New Cinema*, Second Edition (Taipei: Variety Publishing Company, 1997), 47–52

6) Huang Ying-fen, "After the Mobile, Long Take: A Debate on the Aesthetic Tendencies in Contemporary Taiwanese Cinema," *Contemporary*, Number 116 (December, 1995), 78–83

7) David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 230–231

*Orphans of Anyang* (2001), and both Hong Sang-soo and Jia Zhang-ke in several films.<sup>8</sup> Some filmmakers took the long take/static camera style literally; both Tsai Ming-liang in Taiwan and Hong Sang-soo in South Korea have at least one film made up entirely of static long takes, without even slight reframings to follow minute shifts by the actors. Of all of these followers, however, Jia Zhang-ke seems to have best understood the spirit of what Hou was after. Jia has never treated the static long take as an end in and of itself. Nevertheless, this stylistic trait alone largely came to define an auteur, a movement, a national cinema, and a pan-Asian festival style, all at the same time.

This emphasis does not denigrate Yang's own aesthetic accomplishments. Intricate sound-image mismatches became one of his stylistic signatures, but nobody else in the movement seemed to follow suit (at least not until Hou also experimented with this in *A City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster*). Certainly, the radical ambiguity of the ending of *The Terrorizers* – most of all concerning what is objective and what is subjective – is a modernist tour de force. Once again, however, only Hou also attempted to create the same level of ambiguity, especially in the extraordinary sequence surrounding Wan's illness in *Dust in the Wind*.

At first glance, the images appear to be either Wan's own hallucinations or a dream, but the ontological status of many of the images cannot be reconciled with either interpretation. Did Wan suddenly recall a long and prolonged conversation between his father and grandfather when he was but a toddler (and also ill then) – a conversation he could not possibly have overheard or remembered? This sequence alone shows that Hou could be as much a modernist as Yang ever was, but for Hou this was a one-off experiment. In any case, nobody else in the New Cinema imitated Yang's particular daring. Thus, the salient traits of his films cannot be used to define an entire movement or a national cinema. The static, long take, on the other hand, does, whether justified or not.

#### **DUST IN THE WIND AS A VISION REALIZED**

The static long take is easily the most imitable aspect of Hou's style – indeed, by itself, this is easy for any director to emulate, which is why so many others have followed this same aesthetic path, sometimes down to the letter. Hou's intricate compositions and dense staging strategies are another matter entirely. Moreover, neither the static long take nor the com-

8) Ibid

plex compositions and staging were ever ends in themselves, but were instead means of achieving a particular vision of the world. In this regard, *Dust in the Wind* marks the first time Hou fully realized the vision he had been carefully developing during his previous films, making it a fitting end to the New Cinema stage of his career, and setting the groundwork for what was to follow.

At first glance, the film seems "light" compared to Hou's previous three films. Nobody actually dies, nor is there the life-threatening illness of a mother, which cast a dark shadow over the second half of *A Summer at Grandpa's*. Instead, the film follows a young couple (Wan and Huen) who move from a remote mining town to Taipei; Wan leaves to join the military, Huen ends up marrying a postman, and Wan returns home. The film ends with Wan discussing the crops and the weather with his grandfather. One reason the film is so deceptively lighthearted is that the story is by Wu Nien-jen, one of the most recognizable figures in Taiwan today (whether through hosting television shows, appearing in commercials, or, most recently, touring with his own theater productions). Wu is beloved for his wry humor, often able to find something funny about even the smallest details of Taiwanese

life. It is therefore little surprise that *Dust in the Wind* includes two grown, drunken men engaging in a rock moving competition or a mother scolding a son for eating their medicine. In addition, Li Tien-lu's indelible performance as the grandfather produces some of the funniest moments in this film, such as when he accidentally lights a firecracker after a power outage, thinking it was a candle. Considering these details alone, *Dust in the Wind* seems to float like a feather compared to Hou's previous films.

In truth, however, this is arguably the most profound film Hou had made up to that time. Despite a surface of seemingly random quotidian details derived from life in Taiwan in the 1970s, the film possesses a deep underlying structure woven together by a complex array of recurring motifs. Moreover, underneath all this seeming "fluff" lies a philosophical stance that Hou had been developing since the earliest days when he first joined the New Cinema movement in Taiwan, a worldview derived from an idiosyncratic corner of modern Chinese literature.

Nothing affected Hou more profoundly than when his long-trusted screenwriter, Chu Tien-wen, introduced him to Shen Congwen, a famed twentieth century novelist who is diffi-





*Dust in the Wind*

cult to categorize, but whose similarities to Hou are uncanny. Both men could draw from certain aspects of Chinese tradition and reject them at the same time; both are utterly idiosyncratic. Shen's unorthodox syntax and use of long sentences, for example, has been described as being "itself sufficient to keep his prose in a state of rebellion against all of China's literary traditions."<sup>9</sup> In his works of the 1930s, Shen tended to create "plotless, still landscapes of vivid sensory impressions."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Hou claims that what he learned above all else from Shen was a way of seeing the world: "After reading [Shen's autobiography], my feelings and field of vision became quite broad. What I really sensed from him is a non-judgmental perspective. It is not sorrowful, and yet it possesses a deep sense of sadness. Shen Congwen does not look at people and human affairs from a particular point of view and criticize. Everything human, all that life and all that

death, becomes quite normal under his pen, and all are simply things under the sun."<sup>11</sup>

With each film during the New Cinema period, Hou seemed to develop this worldview more fully. By the time he made *Dust in the Wind*, he appears to have reached a point where he could go no further by relying on his own recollections or that of his entourage. Moving to the next stage, starting with *A City of Sadness*, would require him to transfer this vision more deeply onto Taiwan's peculiar historical past.

This perspective on the world affects the entire narrative structure of *Dust in the Wind*: cause and effect is not so much eradicated or deemphasized as cleverly *disguised*. Each scene includes a plethora of quotidian details. However, only in retrospect does it become clear that what first appeared to be but one quotidian detail among many is in reality a key *narrative* element. Hou was already conscious of this narrative strategy during the making of his previous film, noting in particular how a mark on a school desktop is not explained until a later scene.<sup>12</sup> Still, in *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, such a retroactive causal structure remains localized. In *Dust in the Wind*, it becomes a global narrative strategy, one that takes some getting used to. The most serious detail to emerge in

9) Jeff Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 137

10) *Ibid*, 166

11) Chang Jinn-pei, "Before *A City of Sadness*: A Talk with Hou Hsiao-hsien," *The Journal of the Beijing Film Academy*, Volume 13, Number 2 (1990), 69

12) Hou Hsiao-hsien interview by Peggy Chiao in *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook*, 1986 (Taipei: National Film Archive, 1986), 9

the opening scenes is that Wan's father has returned from the hospital on crutches. This is more than counterbalanced by other details that seem unimportant. Why is it that one younger brother will not eat, even when the grandfather tries to convince him he is serving "Western" food? Why does another brother seem willing to eat anything, including medicine from a cabinet? Some audience members will laugh at the Grandfather's antics; others may giggle when the mother goes after the brother with a stick. These moments meld perfectly with others – the arrival of Wan and Huen on a train after school or the scene where Wan and Huen return home with a bag of rice and notice that there will be an open-air film screening that evening. All these seem to be mere incidents, life and nothing more.

It is only later when Huen arrives in Taipei that these earlier scenes retrospectively take on a darker tinge. Deeper connections emerge during a remarkable eating scene on the day of Huen's arrival. The conversation between Wan, Huen, and their other friends is banal, especially when Huen suddenly remembers a gift for Wan from his father back home: a watch. Everyone admires the watch, talking about its waterproof qualities and its likely expense. They are so distracted by this new shining

bauble that few notice that Wan has stopped eating and has even stopped moving. As the others speculate as to the cost of this watch, Wan suddenly storms out of the room. The friends are shocked as are we, the viewers. Shortly thereafter, Wan is shown soaking the watch in water while writing home. Wan has clearly come to accept the watch and its amazing waterproof qualities, yet in the letter he briefly expresses concern about the cost of the watch. Piecing the fragments together, it seems that Wan was most likely upset that day because it was an expensive watch and he worried that his father could not actually afford it. This delayed revelation puts all the preceding scenes in a new, darker light. The reason one boy was not eating while another was eating medicine is that the family is not entirely sure how they will find their next meal. Survival is a real issue for this family and certain details no longer seem innocuous once that is understood.

The core narrative event in the film, Wan and Huen's sudden breakup, is handled in the same way. There are some hints of trouble in the relationship, albeit much less than what is found in the published script.<sup>13</sup> However, there are an equal number of hints that this couple will stay together for life. For this reason, the breakup comes as a shock. No doubt the mili-

tary draft is a chief cause of this relationship's end, but when Wan goes away to the military, he receives a letter from Huen saying that she is counting the days until his return. That same letter provides two other details that appear, at least in retrospect, contradictory. On the one hand, Huen includes tags from women's underwear, which at the time was a way for a young woman to indicate permanent commitment to a young man. On the other hand, she also mentions going to a film with friends, including a postman. (She even includes the ticket stubs as evidence.) The "climax" of the film includes an astonishing number of ellipses. Within less than ten minutes of screen time, we go from Wan reading a letter from Huen expressing how she is his forever to a letter from his own brother saying she has married someone else. Hou did little to prepare us for Huen marrying the postman; he had previously appeared only briefly in two shots, one of which

is an extreme long shot. At that point, he was merely a postman delivering mail with no idea who Huen was. We had no idea who he was, or that he would play such a significant narrative role.

In a sense, what Hou offers the viewer is not cause and effect, but rather effects almost drowned out by the endless details of everyday life. As a result, the causes are left for us to surmise. His extremely elliptical and oblique narration is risky to say the least, and yet what holds it all together is a complex weave of motifs, all of which resonate with each other. The first and last shots of *Dust in the Wind* include two core motifs: the train and the verdant landscapes. The last shot of the film is of clouds and sea mingling with mountain peaks, and yet, off-screen, a distant train whistle can be heard. Shots of clocks at the train station in turn connect to the all-important watch that Wan received from his father. In response to that, Wan writes a letter, one of many in the film. Letters in turn are connections bridging distances, just like trains; but, at the end of the film, letters also signal severances such as when Wan's letters to Huen are inexplicably returned, answered only by a letter from his brother (and to add motivic insult to injury, Huen married a *postman* no less!). This breakup connects with

13) The original script written by Wu Nien-jen and Chu Tien-wen makes clear that Wu wanted to be more explicit about problems in this relationship, which he actually experienced as a young man. One telling moment is a scene never filmed in which Huen works in a restaurant and Wan watches from a distance as male customers flirt with her. Later, she seems very familiar with one of her male coworkers, who she smiles at. While this is still suggestive at best, it was clearly far too direct for Hou's taste (See Chu and Wu, 95, 105).

another motif, movies. The countryside and the city may be connected by trains, but they are contrasted by open-air movie screens in the former versus claustrophobic indoor movie screens in the latter. In her letter to Wan while he is in the service, Huen includes ticket stubs after going to a movie with their mutual friends – *and a certain postman* – a meaningless detail at the time. Then, there is the most ubiquitous motif, one found even strewn on the train tracks or when a mainland fishing family is stranded at his post: food. Charles Tesson's essay on this film captures perfectly the symbolic significance of food in *Dust in the Wind*, encapsulated in the last scene when Wan listens to his grandfather speak of failed crops and capricious weather. As Tesson put it, "The boy, in returning home, has also returned to the source of food and is once again joined together with nature."<sup>14</sup> For Hou, these are the inescapable realities – food, landscapes, and nature all dwarf our histories, forming the fundamentals of human experience, whether in Taiwan or elsewhere. With food, Hou reaches for our primal core. He also expresses a core philosophy.

#### **DUST IN THE WIND AS A RARIFIED STYLE FULLY REALIZED**

Hou's unique vision of the world carefully and steadily evolved over the four feature length films of his New Cinema period from 1983 to 1986. So did all the hallmarks of his style, including what became the most imitated: the static long take. Yet a careful analysis of these films, including crude measurements such as average shot lengths and the percentage of shots that contain camera movements, reveal a surprising development. When one compares Hou to other long take masters, whether predecessors such as Mizoguchi Kenji or Jean Renoir, or contemporaries such as Theo Angelopoulos or Béla Tarr, Hou stands out in this respect: the longer his takes become on average, the more static they become. It is typical for long take masters to utilize a *mobile* camera almost as a substitute for editing. Indeed, the most memorable long takes of a master such as Tarr almost invariably involved incessant tracking shots. Typically, for most of these directors, the norm is for anywhere from 2/3 to 3/4 of the shots to have overt camera movement, often

<sup>14</sup> Charles Tesson, "Dust in the Wind," *Hou Hsiao-hsien* (Taipei: National Film Archive, 2000), 174

<sup>15</sup> Hou Hsiao-hsien interview by author, June 20, 2001

for the duration of the shot. The exceptions, such as Andy Warhol in some films or Chantal Akerman in the 1970s, very consciously employ the static long take almost as an end in itself.

Hou does nothing of the sort. In the earliest days of his career, when he was making commercial films in the Taiwanese film industry, Hou generally averaged around twelve seconds per shot. The average shot length (ASL) of his chapter of *The Sandwich Man*, his first foray as a New Cinema director, was sixteen seconds per shot. Gradually, the average duration of his shots for each film thereafter increased. Both *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *A Summer at Grandpa's* averaged around eighteen-nineteen seconds per shot, and with *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, the average shot length increased to around twenty-four seconds. In *Dust in the Wind*, however, the average duration was over half a minute, a figure that rivals other long take masters such as Mizoguchi and Renoir. Yet, once again, what is particularly striking about Hou is that, as his shots became longer in duration, they also became *increasingly static*. Hou acknowledges that he first became aware of this particular tendency during the production of *A Summer at Grandpa's*. A daily siesta was imposed on the crew since they were shooting in a real, operating clinic; Hou fell in

love with the stilled atmosphere of those times of imposed silence, and tried to replicate it with an increasingly static camera.<sup>19</sup> In *The Boys from Fengkuei*, nearly half the shots still contained at least some camera movement. With *A Summer at Grandpa's*, despite having a nearly identical ASL, the percentage of shots with a mobile framing drops to 1/3. With *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, despite a much longer shot length than its two predecessors, the percentage of shots with camera movement was reduced to roughly 1/4 of the shots. In the case of *Dust in the Wind*, which has many long takes, only about 1/5 of the shots have any sort of camera movement at all, and half of those camera movements are slight, momentary reframings at best.

Despite such radical stillness, however, Hou's shots are often teeming with life. His mostly static long takes do not necessarily lead to Brechtian alienation, and they feel nothing like the static long takes of Warhol in the 1960s or Akerman in the 1970s. This is largely because, while the camera does not, Hou's actors do move often. With each passing film, his staging techniques became more and more complex. Yet it is in *Dust in the Wind* that Hou first became truly stupendous at using complex staging in depth; indeed, in this film Hou seems

to have, for the first time, perfected a technique that is rather difficult for any director to master. This is most evident in the eating and drinking scenes, such as when Wan storms out over the watch. Part of the reason viewers are so caught off guard by that moment is because the staging distracts us from his sullenness, forcing our attention to the others admiring the watch, not the brooding Wan. We can see Wan on the far end of the table, perfectly placed between the heads of those on the near side of the table in relation to the camera. However, the words and movements of the rest of the actors call for our attention as they pass the watch around, try it on, hold it up to their ears, or shake it. Moreover, this is one of those rare long takes with a slight camera movement at the end, a pan right for some reframing. But the purpose of this movement is clear after close analysis: it is designed along with the staging to distract us from Wan until he shockingly storms out. The eating/drinking scene when Wan gives Huen a significant stare is another telling example – rather than place most of the actors on one side of the table, Hou layers them so that the most minute movements by those in the foreground can occlude or draw attention to those in the background. When Wan gives that momentary look her way (we only find out later it is be-

cause she drank with other men present), he is perfectly framed by those in the foreground whose heads are backed to the camera.

It is important to keep in mind that complex staging is only a small part of a much more complex style that is indelibly Hou Hsiao-hsien's. Hou never did this out of principle. Instead, it was the result of piecemeal experimentation done film by film, relying on his instinct along the way as he tried to find the cinematic equivalent to a Shen Congwen-like view of the world. Likewise, the static long take was but one piece of a larger picture, one that allowed him to employ these peculiar staging strategies. In fact, nearly every film Hou made up to *Dust in the Wind* represented a step ahead in terms of his peculiar stylistic development. Even in his commercial stage, Hou had already realized that one did not always need to edit. With *The Boys from Fengkuei*, he discovered distance. With *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, he first became aware of a more retroactive narrative strategy. *Dust in the Wind*, on the other hand, is where Hou seems to have put everything together for the first time in a single package, one dressed with staging techniques that few in history have dared to attempt. Hou himself admits this was the film where he finally overcame the technical limitations of all his previ-

ous films.<sup>16</sup> Yet, as seen here, *Dust in the Wind* is not only the crowning technical achievement for Hou during the New Cinema period – it is also an aesthetic and philosophical milestone.

#### CONCLUSION

*Dust in the Wind* marks both the pinnacle and definitive end of the most cohesive period in Hou's career. It also marks a sort of end to the most definitive period in the history of Taiwanese cinema. Hou's next film in 1987, *Daughter of the Nile*, was an odd step sideways, precisely at a moment when most directors in the New Cinema movement found it difficult to continue their careers. Hou followed that with two masterpieces, *A City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster* (1993). In these two films, Hou seems to have taken the aesthetic and narrative strategies first fully employed in *Dust in the Wind* and applied them to two of the most pivotal eras in Taiwanese history: the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945) and its immediate aftermath. Thereafter, each of Hou's films would become

even more unpredictable. Even in 1995, Chu Tien-wen, who understands Hou best, predicted that from that point on Hou's career would be nothing more than "complications and twists and turns."<sup>17</sup> Subsequent developments have proven her right.

Given the difficult conditions under which the film was made, *Dust in the Wind* is a remarkable accomplishment for Hou. Indeed, it is remarkable that this film has not received more notice than it has. This was not lost on everyone. At the time, Wu Cheng-huan claimed this about *Dust in the Wind*: "With this film, Taiwan finally has a work of art that can compare with the 'economic miracle.'"<sup>18</sup> Perhaps if André Bazin had lived to a ripe old age and seen this film, *Dust in the Wind* would have received the credit it warrants. If this instead had been the last film Hou had ever made, it is still possible that an anthology like this would be warranted, and *Dust in the Wind* would be clearly seen as the crowning masterpiece of an entire career. Hou is lucky that he was born and raised in Taiwan, for it is unlikely that he could have even made a film like this anywhere else. Then again, Taiwan is lucky to have Hou, for it is unlikely that anyone else would have dared to attempt, and then nearly perfect, what he does in this one film.

16) Ibid

17) Chu Tien-wen, *Good Men, Good Women* (Taipei: Rye Field Publishing Company, 1995), 8

18) Wu Cheng-huan, "Dust in the Wind," *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook*, 1987 (Taipei: National Film Archive, 1987), 11