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No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien

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No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien

Description

Hou Hsiao-hsien is arguably the most celebrated Chinese-language film director in the international film festival realm. However, this is not due to an inert cultural tradition so much as to numerous historical/contextual factors – most of all his being from Taiwan -- which together explain the accomplishments of Hou.

Keywords

Hou Hsiao-hsien, Chinese film, international film festival, cinema

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Attached is the first chapter, "Hou and the Taiwanese Experience."

Hou and the Taiwanese Experience

Taiwan is a peculiar place resulting in a peculiar cinema, with Hou Hsiao-hsien being its most indelible product. We should be wary of any totalizing terms to explain this geopolitical and cinematic oddity. Nevertheless, there is one concept which comes close: the “Taiwanese Experience.” The origins of this term are murky, but significantly it came into widespread use in the 1980s, and still retains everyday cachet on the island today. There are volumes devoted to explaining the term.¹ Chen Ruxiu’s important study of the Taiwanese New Cinema bears the revealing title: *Taiwanese New Cinema’s History, Culture and Experience*.² To the uninitiated it might seem surprising that the terms “History” and “Culture” are on the same plane as “Experience.” In Taiwan, however, the last term trumps them all; in Taiwan it is experience alone — in raw, amorphous and yet undeniably human form — which has superseded all attempts to forge a fixed national and ethnic identity.

That a fluid, collective experience overrides all fixed categories is not an intellectual construct in Taiwan, but a fact of daily existence for the average resident on the island. Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalism became possible with the intersection of capitalism, print technology and educational systems together creating a cohesive sense of the “national” since people now could identify with other large groups they could now at least imagine.³ Yet most people to a greater or lesser extent believe in the ontology of these “imagined communities” which underlie their shared sense of national identity. In Taiwan, however, most people do not. Ongoing conditions there have forced its denizens to be hyper-aware of how imaginary everything is, how every label appears to be a phantom of sorts. For decades they were repeatedly told that Taiwan is inseparable from China, and they are thus Chinese. Today they are now more likely to be told that they are not Chinese at all, but “Taiwanese.” Both arguments are based on either culture or ancestry. Yet in her investigation of the Taiwanese identity problem, Melissa Brown notes that these are not what ultimately unites an ethnic group or nation. “Rather, identity is formed and solidified on the basis of common social experience, including economic and political experience.”⁴ As a result of these experiences, polls consistently show

that the vast majority in Taiwan are deeply committed to avoiding all solutions, even labels — calling themselves both Chinese and Taiwanese, favoring neither reunification nor independence.⁵ Of two minds, the Taiwanese as a whole have doggedly pursued a middling status quo — for perpetuity if at all possible — as if they are forever holding their cards to their chest, never laying them down for the world to see, never allowing the hand to be played. Taiwan is an island based on the ongoing art of collective ambivalence.

Who is to blame for this? Just about everyone: the KMT government which ruled Taiwan for over a half a century, the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Europeans, the Japanese, the Americans, certainly the mainland Communists, not to mention indigenous politicians presently calling for independence. Together all of these parties have made experience itself into a capricious teacher on Taiwan. Never allowed to exist on its own, this is an island literally caught in between, always subject to a historical prejudice where Taiwan is nothing more than a strategic, geopolitical tool, a mere appendage of something purportedly greater. A virtual ice palace created by the Cold War, Taiwan today somehow has not “melted” into oblivion as often predicted. Instead it has survived, even thrived, against all odds.

Not coincidentally Hou rose to prominence in the 1980s. He translates this larger state of affairs in indelible cinematic terms which capture, convey, perhaps even embody, the elusive, slippery contours of that collective experience, with no fixed identities, no rhetorical clarities, no balmy certitudes. At first, Hou focuses exclusively on Taiwan’s experience from the late 1950s onwards, since he experienced this firsthand. The roots of that strange state of affairs, however, go back centuries. Nevertheless, Hou’s later career belies a Wittgenstein-like art of historical selection and omission: instead of focusing on the standard historical claims made on Taiwan, Hou’s historical films focus mostly on those eras that most complicate these claims. We shall explore briefly what these “claims” are and how they affect Taiwan to this day.

Competing Historical “Claims” up to 1949

By virtual default, the strongest claim on Taiwan is China’s. Yet this does not mean that the Chinese claim on Taiwan is as unequivocal as the current government of the PRC asserts. China is an especially historically minded culture which has copiously recorded its own past. Yet in all the profuse records of China up to the seventeenth century there is no hint of Chinese designs on Taiwan. By that point China was nearing the end of its second millennium of recorded imperial history spanning several dynasties. The earliest Chinese arrivals to Taiwan usually came seasonally and illegally, and in small numbers. They were far outnumbered by the local aboriginal population at the time. More permanent Chinese settlements only

began in earnest via the impetus provided by the Dutch colony set up on the island in the seventeenth century.⁶ Eerily similar to what happened in the twentieth century, soon unsolicited political events in China spilled over onto the island. As the Ming dynasty deteriorated, a Ming general (Zheng Chenggong, aka “Koxinga”) came over and drove out the Dutch, a feat that today earns him the title as “the Father of Taiwan.” Yet Zheng’s eyes were set on returning to China, a cause continued by his successors. Only the failure of Zheng’s son to drive out the Qing dynasty led to the formal annexation of Taiwan by the Chinese government in 1684, merely for security reasons.⁷

What follows is the two-hundred-plus-year rule of the island by the last Chinese dynasty. The Qing treated Taiwan with a great deal of reluctance and ambivalence, finding it more trouble than it was worth. (In fact, initially the Qing offered the Dutch to buy the island back, which was declined.)⁸ Seemingly stuck with Taiwan, the Qing rulers made almost no effort to develop it. Emigration to Taiwan remained either illegal or greatly restricted for many of those years, and it seemed as if the most corrupt and inept governors were sent there. Each governor served short, three-year terms, and none made Taiwan their home. During these 211 years of Qing rule, the locals — whether of Chinese descent or the aboriginals — protested against the Qing government no fewer than seventy-three times, and resorted to violence no less than sixty other times.⁹ Taiwan remained a place of unruly character, attracting Chinese of pioneering stock who desired to escape conditions in China, most of all the rampant poverty and scarce land in nearby Fujian province. These independent-minded immigrants in turn were looked down upon by those who remained in China. Already the economic, social, political and cultural developments in Taiwan had diverged from China as a whole. The Qing did nothing to mitigate this; in fact, their policies only widened this split.¹⁰

Even with ten thousand troops on the island,¹¹ evidence of nominal rule, if not misrule, indicated to foreign colonial powers that China had little effective control over Taiwan. Only in the nineteenth century, when Qing rulers noticed foreign designs on Taiwan, did they begin to pay the island more heed. First, the government in Beijing lifted all bans on emigration.¹² After a brief conflict with the French, the Qing government decided to make Taiwan a full-fledged province in 1885 instead of a mere part of Fujian. For the first time Taiwan had a competent ruler with foresight named Liu Mingchuan, who not only established a stable administration, but also began to build an infrastructure that included railroads and electricity. However, Liu left in 1891, and inexplicably all of his plans for modernization were dropped. Taiwan fell once more into a state of gross neglect.¹³

In 1895, when the Qing dynasty lost a war with the Japanese over Korea, China’s historical attitude towards Taiwan became clear. The Chinese government signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki and ceded Taiwan and the Pescadores to Japan “in perpetuity.” By all international standards of the time, this was considered a legal

agreement, and even the West recognized Taiwan as now being a part of Japan.¹⁴ That China easily parted with the island to save itself indicates not a belief that Taiwan was native soil so much as a burdensome appendage best excised from the mainland body.

Unlike the Qing era, which is conspicuously absent in Hou's historically minded oeuvre concerning Taiwan, the Japanese colonial era (1895–1945) forms at least part of the historical backdrop in the famed historical trilogy of *City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster* and *Good Men, Good Women*. Yet in doing so, Hou is not bolstering a Japanese “counterclaim” to China's. He very well could have. Using criteria such as effective rule and development, one could say the Japanese have a stronger claim on Taiwan than the Chinese. Even most mainland Chinese at the time seemed to accept that Taiwan was no longer Chinese soil. Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China, said that Taiwan should become an independent nation in the 1920s. Even during the war with Japan, Chiang Kai-shek in 1938, and the Communists as late as 1941, all thought it best for Taiwan to become independent of Japan, not returned to China. It was not the usual dictates of history, culture nor ancestry which demanded the return of Taiwan to China. It was desperate, wartime politics.¹⁵ Everything changed in 1943 at the Cairo Conference when the United States offered Taiwan to Chiang Kai-shek to ensure his not suing for a separate peace with Japan. In retrospect it was a major blunder on the part of the United States. According to George Kerr, an American observer at the time who was intimately familiar with Taiwan, the Cairo Declaration set in train “a long series of events which are now cause for deep regret.”¹⁶

One other thing to keep in mind: there was not a strong national identity among the Taiwanese as one finds among the Koreans during the same time period when they also suffered under Japanese tutelage. Even in 1945, even after fifty-one years of Japanese “corruption,” this amorphous identity was amenable to the idea of becoming Chinese once again — or maybe for the first time. This was the stated goal of the new rulers, the KMT Nationalists. Yet in very short order — in a few months, in fact — the actions of the KMT virtually ensured the opposite of their rhetoric: a new and more permanent Taiwanese identity was being etched in deep pools of blood. This all came to a head in the 228 Incident in February of 1947, which will be discussed in detail in chapter 3. For now suffice it to say that the new Nationalist government behaved even more like a colonizer than its Japanese predecessor, and with greater brutality resulting in the deaths of thousands. The KMT's indecorous, brutal behavior was widely reported in China. Soon 228 would become a focal point of resistance to the KMT throughout China, accelerating its eventual defeat there which came only two years later.¹⁷ Ironically, the incident literally created a self-made hostile corner in Taiwan which the KMT would find itself backed into in 1949.

After all these capricious historical turns, what does this term “Taiwanese” really mean? It depends. “Taiwan” and “Taiwanese” have been terms of convenience

reflecting certain geopolitical realities, but not terms readily embraced by those who once ruled the island, or those across the straits who desire to rule it one day. In the murky semantic border between the words “Chinese” and “Taiwanese” is added a further, domestic complication, one that is difficult to clarify in English. Ever since the late 1940s, a differentiation is made by those known as *benshengren* (“original province people”) and those called *waishengren* (“outer province people”). The former are multi-generational Taiwanese with mainland ancestry but whose roots on the island go back centuries. Historically this was not a unified group because they included a significant Hakka minority which has its own dialect and customs, and which often has come into conflict with the Hoklo majority. The Hoklo are comprised mostly of Fujianese immigrants who speak the Taiwanese dialect similar to the Fujianese dialect spoken directly across the Straits of Taiwan. By contrast, the *waishengren* are recent arrivals, those mainlanders who came over after 1945, the majority of whom came in 1949 when the KMT lost China to the Communists. Roughly speaking, the *benshengren* make up 85% of the population on the island today, while the “mainlander” *waishengren* comprise close to 14%. The remaining 1% of the current population is mostly made up of a declining aboriginal population. In ethnic terms, this means that close to 99% of the population on Taiwan is of Chinese descent, but this does not make them any more “Chinese” than Canadians of English descent are “English,” or Mexicans of Spanish descent are “Spanish.” Moreover, with each passing day it becomes more and more accurate to call all residents on the island (including *waishengren*) Taiwanese, not Chinese, given how radically different the historical experiences on Taiwan have been from mainland China.

In any case, after 1949 both the *benshengren* and the *waishengren* on the island were cut off from China, forced to live together with quietly festering historical wounds which have never completely healed. After initially trying to justify their actions, for nearly forty years officials simply denied the massacre in 1947 had ever happened. Yet when Taiwan, with bitter irony, became the last bastion of the Nationalists, the government was forced to modify its stance in radical ways if it was to survive. The KMT lacked real legitimacy after the 228 Incident, a key factor in the reforms it eventually undertook, resulting in a checkered record like that of the previous Japanese administration. The Taiwanese *benshengren* would be at first the recipients of change, later the beneficiaries of change, and finally the masters of change, changes which first manifested themselves on the economic front, and eventually bore fruit on both the political and cultural fronts. These created the Taiwan we know today: an economic dynamo and one of the most democratic “nations” on earth with a vibrant culture to boot, including a particular film director now of world renown.

Hou and the Post-War Taiwanese Experience

Hou Hsiao-hsien literally enters this picture in 1949. Westerners and mainland Chinese have their share of mistaken notions about Hou, but the Taiwanese have their own. Until recent years, the most common local misperception was that Hou is a *benshengren*. Hou has cultivated that persona publicly: he speaks fluent Taiwanese and speaks Mandarin with a heavy Taiwanese inflection. Furthermore, his films seem to express fully what it means to be Taiwanese, most of all for *benshengren*. Thus many in Taiwan are surprised to discover that Hou is a *waishengren* who was born in mainland China in 1947, and moved to Taiwan when he was only two years old. Hou's family is Hakka, the special peripatetic Chinese minority who were often persecuted by the Han majority in Taiwan before 1895.¹⁸ Still, Hou grew up in southern Taiwan, mostly among *benshengren*. Hou's father died when he was young, allowing him to wander outside more than was the norm for children of the time. These self-guided wanderings forced him to use Taiwanese on a daily basis at a young age, and proved to be definitive influences.

Thus, Hou for much of his life would identify most with the group he should have had the most tenuous ties with, the *benshengren*. This indicates how much his actual experience, not ancestry, nor any fixed cultural ideology, determines Hou's identity and world view. Being both Hakka and a *waishengren* only increased Hou's sensitivity. Chu Tian-wen, a renowned author and Hou's scriptwriter, explains why it was that those of her generation — born of at least one parent from the mainland, yet growing up in Taiwan — would be among the leading proponents of the Taiwanese Experience in the cultural realm. At home they only heard about China which she later found to be imaginary once she went there. Yet it was the Taiwan before their eyes that they experienced firsthand, a world entirely different from the hearth-side stories of the mainland. That diasporic tension, non-existent for multi-generational Taiwanese who take everything around them as a matter of course, proved to be fertile artistic ground.¹⁹

For writers like Chu and filmmakers like Hou, Taiwan would prove to be a virtually bottomless reservoir of thematic material. But what did Hou witness and experience? In a word, change: politically, economically, culturally and cinematically. When Hou becomes a director himself in 1980, all of these changes were either already occurring or about to.

Hou's Post-War Political Experience

Hou's father was a low-level bureaucrat who came over to Taiwan to lead an uneventful existence until his premature death. There is scant evidence that Hou and his family were ever directly affected by post-war politics. Still, the political

was pervasive in post-war Taiwan, always lurking in the background of daily life. Perhaps not surprisingly, the same is true of Hou's films, at least those which do make some political references: *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1985), *City of Sadness* (1989) and *Good Men, Good Women* (1995). Hou has often been criticized for his political ambivalence and evasion. Few can even locate him on Taiwan's true political spectrum, which is not "Right versus Left" (a distinction with little meaning in Taiwan), but "Independence versus Reunification." What people fail to realize is how typical Hou's politics are in Taiwan. Most residents there hold both politics and politicians in low esteem, a direct result of a half century of oppressive KMT rule. The *benshengren* majority even had a common saying that "getting involved in politics is like eating dog shit."²⁰

In hindsight, it seems clear enough that the KMT government could not have kept this up forever: despite its basic ideological premise as a government of the "Republic of China," which purportedly represents all of China, no amount of propaganda could disguise the fact that it ruled only Taiwan and a few other smaller islands. On the other hand, there was some historical luck in their favor. When Chiang Kai-shek and what remained of the KMT retreated to Taiwan in 1949, it seemed on its last legs. The party had lost so much credibility that it was cut off even from U.S. support. The mainland Communists had drawn up plans for an imminent invasion of the island to finish off the Nationalists once and for all. All this changed with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Two days after it began, the United States sent the Seventh Fleet to the Straits of Taiwan. The Korean conflict simultaneously ended plans by the Communists to attack the island.²¹ Taiwan had once again undergone another dramatic metamorphosis: it became a KMT-led fortress on the front lines of the Cold War.

This tense Cold War atmosphere pervaded the 1950s, and reached its height in August of 1958 with the so-called "Cannon War" with the PRC over the islands of Kinmen and Matsu, both within eyesight of Fujian province. Chiang Kai-shek's hope was to get the United States directly involved in an attack against mainland China, but the Americans only offered indirect aid and even tried unsuccessfully to convince the KMT to relinquish control over the two islands. Finally a compromise between the two distrustful allies was reached in October: the ROC would no longer attack the PRC in exchange for continued control over Kinmen and Matsu. The Chinese Communists protested, but some have speculated that Mao secretly agreed to Nationalist control over these two islands. Being so close to the mainland, this would help mitigate any drive towards Taiwanese independence.²² The result is a stalemate which persists to this day: Kinmen and Matsu remain under the control of the ROC, not the PRC.

The tense, paranoid atmosphere of the Cold War was well suited for Chiang's quest for absolute power over the island. Smaller, local sections of the party were all inextricable parts of larger sections leading directly to the top — the Central

Committee controlled by Chiang himself.²³ This reorganization dovetailed with existing laws such as the Mobilization Anti-Rebellion Law in 1948, and martial law, which was declared in June of 1949 and not lifted until 1987. The former order greatly increased Chiang's presidential powers, allowing him to wipe out dissent of any sort. Along with the martial law, the 1948 law formed the basis of what would be known as the "White Terror." In effect, Taiwan became a police/military state that was centered in the National Defense Committee (later called the National Security Council), through which Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, controlled all vital information and intelligence gathering.²⁴

The Cold War served as a ready-made smoke screen to divert attention away from the possibility of Taiwanese independence. Indeed, the announced intentions of many KMT policies were to fight communism, yet the actual targets included groups who advocated independence and showed no interest in communism whatsoever. Nevertheless, there was local resistance to the KMT which dates back to 1947, especially among Taiwanese exiles. Within Taiwan itself resistance developed more slowly. Still, even in the 1950s there were people who began to question the premise of the "Republic of China." The first sign was the journal, *Free China*, which initially supported the KMT, but eventually became quite critical of the party and was consequently shut down.²⁵ During the 1970s, a second wave of opposition arose and gained momentum as the decade progressed. The reason is clear enough: legitimacy, already a vexing problem for the KMT, only worsened as the decade wore on. Once the government lost its UN seat in 1972, it was less able to deflect resistance. Moreover, Chiang Kai-shek himself would die in 1975, by which point effective control had already passed to Chiang Ching-kuo.

On the surface, the son seemed of the same political ilk as his father. Chiang Ching-kuo had been a key player on the political scene before 1972, effectively running Taiwan for his father through a number of key positions, most of all in intelligence gathering and the military. Once he came to the forefront in the 1970s, he still utilized a centralized system in a sometimes capricious manner. Chiang Ching-kuo, however, never shared his father's obsession with recovering the mainland, a crucial difference. Instead, he engaged in pragmatic policies that centered on Taiwan, beginning major infrastructure projects that helped to modernize the island. Most importantly, the younger Chiang began a process of "localization" that allowed native Taiwanese into the administration, as well as into the party itself.²⁶ This would have a profound effect on Taiwan in the long run, in part because it meant the inclusion in 1988 of Chiang's successor Lee Teng-hui (Li Denghui), who was a *benshengren*.

In the new climate of the 1970s was born the "outside-the-party movement," (*Dang wai*). This movement at first consisted of non-KMT candidates who ran, and sometimes won, in local elections despite widespread KMT fraud. Once the United States withdrew recognition of the ROC government in December of 1978, things

came to a head a year later in southern Taiwan. The so-called “Formosa Incident,” sometimes known as the “Kaohsiung Incident,” was the first major public protest against the KMT since the 228 Incident of 1947. The leaders of “the party without a name” staged a mass human rights rally in Kaohsiung on December 10, 1979, the International Day for Human Rights. When the police in Kaohsiung came out in force to intimidate the large crowds, the people did not give in, even breaking through police lines. Upon seeing this, one witness said, “History has had a new beginning.”²⁷ This opened the floodgates of the 1980s.

Hou was not involved in any of this. During the 1970s Hou was slowly working his way up in the Taiwanese film industry, showing no evidence of taking any political sides along the way. There was no indication during that time that he would take on the roles and issues and controversies he would eventually become embroiled in. But things change in Taiwan — even overnight.

Hou’s and the Post-War Economic Experience

The “Economic Miracle” is undoubtedly the best known aspect of the Taiwanese Experience abroad, and Hou’s films allude to it on occasion. Even Hou’s own career partially reflects this. Cinema was one industry which seemed to miss the Economic Miracle. However, Hou ended up working in the commercial film industry for over a decade before venturing out in his own virtual cottage industry. This is quite typical in Taiwan: Hou presently operates a small-level enterprise creating a product primarily for export, albeit in his case it is for a niche market, not a mass one.

What is often overlooked is how directly linked the Economic Miracle is to the 228 Incident. The primary cause of the 1947 uprising, and the subsequent bloodbath, was economic. For as long as it could, the KMT tried to maintain absolute power in Taiwan, and only slowly relinquished that power as circumstances dictated. When it comes to economics, however, the KMT relinquished power almost from the start because it really had no other choice. For Taiwan this was the second modernization, one that far surpassed what the Japanese had done. For the KMT, it was their first modernization. No longer would they be caged in the land-locked, agrarian mentality of war-torn China. Instead they quickly learned to rely on international trade.

Given how spectacularly this economy performed over the last few decades, it is easy to forget that the prognosis for Taiwan’s economy was poor in the 1950s, especially with the sudden influx of 1.5 million people from the mainland. Taiwan had an unfavorable land-to-population ratio, minimal capital resources and a discredited leadership, all of which gave the country “basket case” status in the eyes of foreign economists.²⁸ Yet from such inauspicious beginnings, the island experienced growth records that are among the highest in human history. The industrial sector grew 12.2% a year from 1953 to 1964, during which time Taiwan received ample aid from

the United States. After American aid was dropped, Taiwan's economic performance spurted ahead. The industrial sector grew at an annual rate of 16.1% from 1965 to 1975.²⁹ The economy as a whole, including the relatively stagnant agricultural sector, grew on average 10% a year from 1963 to 1980. Once the economy had fully matured, the island still recorded an annual rate of growth of 7.5% from 1981 to 1995.³⁰ Of central importance in this picture is how the populace at large benefited. The average Taiwanese in 1950 had the personal income of the average mainland Chinese. By the 1980s, the per capita income in Taiwan was twenty times that of mainland China.³¹

Several specific policies by the KMT fostered this astronomical growth. A thoroughgoing land reform turned land capital into business capital, laying the groundwork for economic development. Local landowners on the island did not resist, since the 228 Incident was still fresh in their memories. At the same time, however, the KMT government gave these landless landowners a stake in major government industries, effectively ending a feudal system by transforming its primary beneficiaries into capitalists.³² Another key to Taiwan's economic development was privatization.³³ Overall the government held back publicly owned industries while allowing privately owned ones to thrive. By 1959, the percentage of industrial enterprises that were privately run exceeded those run by the government.³⁴ From only 43% of industrial production being privately owned in 1954, the percentage had jumped to 80% in 1972, and 90% by the mid-1980s, making Taiwan, by any standard, one of the most privately owned economies in the world.³⁵ The economy became highly decentralized, dominated by small- and medium-sized enterprises to an extent not found elsewhere. In 1981, 45% of the manufacturing was done by small- and medium-sized businesses. In the most successful and dynamic part of Taiwan's economy, manufacturing for export, the percentage jumped to 68% of the total.³⁶ Moreover, the main beneficiaries of this policy were the *benshengren*, not the "elite" of recent mainland descent. Stringent educational, political and cultural policies notwithstanding, the mainlanders had neither the gall nor the wherewithal to stand in the way of a hostile majority as they had done in 1947.

The government also steered the economy towards export. Taiwan is heavily trade-oriented: by the 1980s, exports and imports accounted for over 85% of its economy, a startling figure when you realize that in Japan the figure is only 30%.³⁷ Back in the 1950s, the government utilized the so-called "import-substitution policy" common to many newly industrialized nations. This focused on developing the domestic market through protectionist measures. In Taiwan this policy was unusually successful, largely because this was a temporary measure restricted mostly to the capital goods industry. For consumer goods, unfinished goods and manufacturing as a whole, almost all the growth came from filling domestic demand and almost none from import substitution per se. In the Philippines, by contrast, nearly one quarter to one third of the growth in all four of these areas was due to import-substitution, and

only 60–70% to filling domestic demand. This in the long run weakened industries in the Philippines.³⁸ Soon the ROC government steered Taiwan towards an outward-looking economy by encouraging export over import. In 1959, they abolished a dual currency exchange-rate system, devalued the currency, reduced tariffs and set up laws, regulations and tax rates that all encouraged exporting.³⁹ Perhaps no other decision made by the KMT-led government has so markedly improved the lives of the Taiwanese.

In short, while denied a political stake for decades, the Taiwanese *benshengren* were already given a strong stake in the economy even at the height of the Cold War. The Taiwanese majority took advantage of this economic leeway to the fullest, even to the point of flouting its often poorly enforced legal boundaries. As a result, Taiwan has been much like an underground economy that operates above ground. The government did retain strict control in banking, and getting a loan was difficult for the average Taiwanese. To get around this, the Taiwanese set up thousands of ad hoc private credit associations (*biaohui*) to raise their own capital, a remarkably risky venture that pays off handsomely if all the members in any one group are trustworthy.⁴⁰ Many businesses would openly operate without licenses, and most would keep two account books, one for themselves, and a diminutive version for tax collectors. The population in general tends to under-report its income to the government, making the true per capita income hard to measure. By the 1980s, wealth in Taiwan was to be found everywhere, largely the result of both hard work and disdain for government interference. The KMT-led government observed this collective civil disobedience, and understood that its only choice was mostly to look the other way. Meanwhile Hou and others of the New Cinema in the 1980s, when this Economic Miracle was now an established fact, began to explore what this all meant for the people actually living on the island. Their answers reveal a great deal of ambivalence.

Hou and the Slow Thaw of Taiwan's Post-War Culture

If Hou Hsiao-hsien's links with both post-war politics and economics are more indirect, the same cannot be said for post-war culture, where Hou becomes a central figure. For most people, the first thing that comes to mind with Taiwan is economics, followed perhaps by politics. By contrast, culture in Taiwan is usually an afterthought, and even then it is often dismissed as being either nonexistent or nothing more than a Chinese derivative. However, for those already aware of the film festival scene in the last two decades, the opposite is true: when they think of Taiwan, they are likely to think of Hou first, plus others such as Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang. What they often miss is how inextricably linked Hou the cultural phenomenon is to these larger political and economic forces within Taiwan.

Since 1949, Taiwanese culture has been caught between these political and economic forces described above. Taiwan's culture began as a centripetal force under the tight control of the KMT government, only to eventually become a centrifugal force which now plays unofficial diplomatic roles denied to the government itself. In addition, the unsettled nature of the Taiwanese situation has made Taiwanese culture even more dynamic and inventive. Hou is not the only evidence of that, but he is one of the best.

Once again, this cultural dynamic originated in some of the most inauspicious conditions imaginable. Among the émigrés to Taiwan in 1949 were some of China's best and brightest, many who came not out of loyalty toward the KMT as out of fear of the Communists. A motley group, circumstances forced them to live and raise their children on the island, only slowly realizing there was no going back. Still, for quite some time there were strict limits as to what they could express about this strange, new world. By dint of a government monopoly over culture, education and the media, there was a concerted effort to foist a Chinese identity on the local population and suppress anything distinctively Taiwanese.⁴¹ The prevailing feeling at the time was that the KMT's loss on the mainland was due to a failure of propaganda, not policy. In Taiwan, the party was not about to make the same mistake again. Culture was a key component in what the KMT saw as a fight to the death.

Government control pervaded all cultural areas, but it was particularly stringent in the education of young people. "The Three Principles of the People," the official ideology of the state, permeated every area of academic life. A key organization was a China Youth Anti-Communist Salvation League started in 1952. This organization established political activities and military training for young people.⁴² Designed to focus attention on the "communist bandits" a mere hundred miles away, it was also part of a large-scale effort to eradicate anything specifically "Taiwanese." Other educational policies were at the forefront of this tacit strategy as well: starting in 1951, all classes had to be taught in Mandarin, and native Taiwanese children were punished by harsh fines every time they spoke a word of the Taiwanese dialect in the classroom.⁴³ Such practices survived up to the 1970s. (Hou's own fluency in the Taiwanese dialect came not from the classroom, but from the streets.)

The government also provided direct guidance over literature and cinema. In 1950, the China Association for Literature and the Arts was set up with ten members, one of whose responsibility was to oversee film. This resulted in heavily propagandistic art imbued with anti-communist themes while extolling the virtues of Sun Yat-sen's "Three Principles of the People."⁴⁴ The stranglehold was further tightened in 1954 when this association announced a government policy called "The Cultural Cleansing Movement." This campaign had the expressed goal of ridding the culture of all "Red" (communistic), "Black" (pessimistic views of the underside of society) and "Yellow" (licentious, pornographic) elements. The three undesirable "colors" in turn formed the sweeping basis for all subsequent government censorship

which was taken over by the all-important GIO (Government Information Office) in 1955.⁴⁵ In 1960, the tenth anniversary of the supreme cultural body from which the GIO took its cues reiterated these anti-“Red,” “Black” and “Yellow” principles.⁴⁶

Still, this was authoritarian control, not totalitarian. Cracks began to appear early on in various cultural arenas, and eventually in cinema as well. Despite such stringent government controls, even in the early years there were real debates over issues relevant to Taiwan, so long as they fell short of openly espousing Leftist ideas or Taiwanese independence. There were debates between “East” versus “West,” “indigenous culture” versus “modern culture.” A common theme in such debates was the relation of Chinese culture with modernization, most of all dealing with the relevance of Confucianism in the modern world. Many intellectuals in Taiwan became interested in what they called “Modern neo-Confucianism.” The point of agreement for these intellectuals was that Confucianism would have to be remade for modern times, and to do so required drawing from other traditions, including Buddhism and Western philosophy. Of particular importance in this regards was Mo Zongsan who tried to find a link between Confucianism and the ethics of Kant.⁴⁷ Many others, however, envisioned a very different type of modernization, one that had little room for tradition altogether. The modern Confucians found themselves at odds with the *Free China* group and the growing popularity of existentialism in Taiwan, most of all the ideas of Sartre.⁴⁸

Before the 1980s, the true cultural vanguard in Taiwan was undoubtedly literature, something best seen in the bitter disputes between two significant movements: the Modernists (*Xiandai wenxue*) versus the so-called Nativists (*Xiangtu wenxue*). When restricted to philosophers and other scholars, the above mentioned debates seemingly stuck to the divide of East versus West. Once the debates spilled over into literature, however, other messages began to creep in almost imperceptibly, including early suggestions of a peculiarly Taiwanese political spectrum which now openly dominates the island today.

This began with the advent of the Modernist literary movement in the 1960s, directly linked to the rising popularity of Sartre at the time.⁴⁹ The Modernist movement in Taiwan stood apart from all previous literature movements in Chinese history. By delving into psychological and philosophical issues, they steered clear of the primary obsession of modern Chinese literature during most of the twentieth century: national destiny. The Modernists instead emphasized artistry and refinement, and resisted any prevailing political, moral or aesthetic prescriptions.⁵⁰ Compared to Western Modernists, the Taiwanese counterparts were much more conservative; at the same time, however, they wrote about a collapse of Confucian ideals, and castigated the prevailing culture of the time.⁵¹ At the center of this movement in the 1960s was the journal, *Wen Xing*. Initially *Wen Xing* focused on literature and the arts, but in the early 1960s, after the fall of *Free China*, it joined the debate between tradition and Westernization/modernization. The writers at *Wen Xing* clearly sided

with the latter camp, above all, the writer, Li Ao. As a result, the journal became more and more subject to attacks from the conservative ruling elite.⁵²

In the 1970s, however, the primary opponents of the Modernists were no longer the conservative elite, but from another literary movement that had also had its roots in certain writers from the 1960s: the Nativists. With the emergence of the Nativists, the division between tradition versus modernization and/or Westernization became more complicated, even muddled, since they set themselves against both the Modernists and the conservative ruling elite. The Nativists even saw the Modernists and the ruling elite in league in their joint eagerness (at least in the Nativists' eyes) to emigrate at the first sign of crisis in Taiwan, of which there were many in the 1970s starting with the loss of the UN seat, thereby abandoning the common folk on the island. The Nativists also reacted aesthetically: in diametric opposition to the Westernized hermeticism of the Modernists, the Nativists brought to the fore a new ethnic consciousness reflecting a new generation that had grown up in Taiwan.⁵³ The typical Nativist aesthetic strategy was a socially engaged realism, not aesthetic experimentation, and their avowed goal was to convey the details of everyday life in Taiwan as it really was.⁵⁴ In 1977, the underlying rhetoric behind this movement came to the fore in a heated debate that occurred in a number of journals, and at a now famous conference called to discuss the movement. The upshot of this is what is now known as the "Nativist controversy."

The Nativists started with an anti-Western premise, seemingly joining on one side of the East/West divide. Initially they asked why science books in Taiwan were often in English, not Chinese.⁵⁵ From there their concerns centered on a Taiwan they perceived as a victim of a parasitic economic system that left the island dependent, not independent.⁵⁶ Some writers depicted the underlying conflict as being between Chinese culture and what they called a "Japanese/Western commercial culture."⁵⁷ The numerous 1970s setbacks on the international stage led others to call for the Taiwanese to look to themselves, and no longer to the West.⁵⁸ Indeed there was a sense of anxiety and a thinly veiled urgency to their words. Says one writer: "There will never be an international morality; one has to struggle for one's own survival, using the most realistic means possible."⁵⁹

But there was more than an anti-Western stance. While opponents of the time attacked the Nativist movement either on literary or anti-communist grounds, none of them clarified the movement's defining term. Translated literally, *xiangtu* means "native soil." But which native soil does this refer to? One writer broaches the question as follows: "Our native soil is good; add to our sense of the native soil; allow us to recognize our native soil; be proud of our native soil. This will make us not easily tempted by things foreign, or be polluted by foreign culture." Nevertheless, when he asks whether this native soil is China or Taiwan, he never answers one way or another.⁶⁰ In hindsight, that was the central question. Later many declared that the ultimate criterion used by the Nativists was how much their literature exhibited

a “Taiwanese consciousness.”⁶¹ At the time, however, the Nativists as a whole were evasive on the issue of Taiwan versus China, perhaps because this was still a taboo subject: some of those identified as Nativists favored a “Greater China” idea; others implicitly favored Taiwan instead of China.⁶² Where various people stood on this all-important question was not clarified until the “Formosa Incident” of 1979 brought this issue of Taiwan versus China to the fore. After 1979, as both the cultural and political climate began to open up, many of the old divisions quickly became irrelevant, most of all the division between East versus West. Taiwan was now the cultural centerpiece.

Still, all of these debates were intellectual debates, not popular ones. That they were even allowed to occur was largely because they had little encroachment in the lives of the average resident on the island. What was happening with the populace at large? Perhaps the best way to answer this is to look at how popular religion has developed in Taiwan. During the first two decades after 1949, the numbers of Christians increased steadily in Taiwan. Hou’s own mother became a Christian after the death of his father, and she had a Christian burial, as seen in *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*. There was a large number of Christians in the ruling classes, and the KMT government in the 1960s and 1970s brought in famous evangelists and broadcast their religious rallies on local television.⁶³ Still, the Christian Church in Taiwan was on both ends of the political spectrum. The largest protestant denomination in Taiwan, the Presbyterians, has played a key role in the Taiwanese Independence Movement, basing their challenge to the KMT on the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany.⁶⁴ Yet given the average Taiwanese’s distrust of politics, the number of Christians in Taiwan has declined, proportionally speaking, starting as early as 1965.⁶⁵ By stark contrast, the number of Buddhists and Taoists has exponentially exploded since that time. In 1960, there were just over 800 temples registered as Buddhist in Taiwan; by 1989 there were over 4000. In 1960, there were close to 3000 Taoist temples; by 1989 there were nearly 8000.⁶⁶ (This trend has not abated since: in the mid-1980s there were 800,000 declared Buddhists, whereas by the year 2000 the number had exceeded 5,000,000.)⁶⁷ There appears to be a direct link between increasing wealth for the average Taiwanese and an increasing support of indigenous religions: often a steep rise in new temples follows an increase in average income by two or three years.⁶⁸ Once again, this is in stark contrast to mainland China — in fact, it is currently the exact opposite.⁶⁹ By this religious standard, the putatively more Westernized island is in fact more “native” — more “Chinese” even — than the behemoth across the straits. Yet these trends among the general population mesh seamlessly with their rapid modernization and adaptation of many Western practices as well.

There is one other aspect of Taiwanese culture worth noting. Whether under the Japanese or at the height of the KMT’s control, Taiwan has always needed to reach out to the world to survive. Today, however, the unsettled political status of

Taiwan has dried up the normal avenues of diplomacy. This gives new meaning, even urgency, to cultural outreach and exchange, or what would be better termed as “cultural diplomacy.” In this regards film has come to the forefront, with Hou the leading cinematic ambassador of Taiwan. But the real pioneer in this regards is the Cloud Gate Dance Company, founded in 1973 by Lin Huaimin. Cloud Gate was the first modern dance company in Asia. Every year the company puts out a new performance, and they range from specific themes like Chinese emigrants to Taiwan (*Legacy* in 1978), to famous works in Chinese tradition (*Nine Songs* and *Bamboo Dream* in 2001), to works that exist in a purely abstract realm (*Moonwater* in 1999). Lin does draw from traditional elements, most of all Taoism and Buddhism. Yet its mélange of audacious acrobatics coupled with Cloud Gate’s signature movements of almost ghost-like calm, all accompanied by the music ranging from Bach to Arvo Part, speak to something much greater than the sum of its component parts of East and West.⁷⁰ Such performances have proven to be an exportable commodity, making Lin the first Taiwanese artist of international standing, but not the last. As a native *benshengren*, Lin Huaimin’s domestic cultural impact has been stupendous. As a teacher he had students like Peggy Chiao, who would later become one of the leading figures on the Taiwanese film scene. Chiao avers that it was Lin that got her generation (including *waishengren* such as herself) to think about having a distinctive culture of their own. This idea filtered down into many other cultural realms, including cinema.⁷¹

Hou in the Taiwanese Film Industry

So where was Hou all this time? Not at the barricades or the front lines. Not even at the roundtables of debate. Instead Hou was largely insulated from many of these larger societal trends in a carefully sequestered world. In 1973, only one year after the ROC lost its UN seat, he joined the Taiwanese commercial film industry, and began what first promised to be an unremarkable career in an unremarkable cinema. A mere decade-plus later, Hou became Taiwan’s leading cultural ambassador abroad. This only makes sense after understanding the transformations of Taiwanese cinema which went hand in hand with larger transformations in Taiwan. Taiwan’s cinema has not simply reflected and/or refracted these historical oddities discussed above; it has also played contrary roles in abetting them. In the past, cinema served as a tool for a historical and political whitewash. Then suddenly it came to play the opposite role in revealing long suppressed realities, not just on the screens on the island, but more importantly in the world at large. Hou in particular played a key role in this historical unearthing.

Still, the film industry Hou joined in 1973 was then ill-equipped for such a task. Cinema anywhere is a conspicuous and pervasive entity, an artistic medium

requiring a high level of institutional support whether private or public, or both. As a result, it cannot avoid circumspection from society at large. Certainly, Taiwanese cinema could hardly have hoped to steer clear of these political, economic and cultural forces shaping the island over the last few decades. Yet despite the dramatic changes in Taiwanese cinema during the course of Hou's career, the one constant is that the Taiwanese government, whether old or new, set policies that benefited others cinemas — most of all Hong Kong and Hollywood — at the expense of local production. Ironically, this would also be to Hou's personal benefit.

A bona fide commercial film industry in Taiwan took a long time to develop. Despite Japan's record as one of the greatest national cinemas in history, despite the thoroughness of Japan's modernization program which transformed the island's infrastructure, medicine, agriculture and culture, and as much as the island provided a wide variety of potential settings for filming, Taiwan did not become a production base for Japanese cinema as had occurred in Manchuria after 1931. Instead, Taiwan remained primarily a market for Japanese films. By 1935, forty-eight theaters exclusively showed films, thirty-one of which would survive until 1945.⁷² There was no real development of cinema between 1945 and 1949, given the tumultuous conditions. Therefore, the true history of Taiwanese cinema begins in 1949 when Taiwan becomes the KMT's last theater of political operations. Still, it developed at a snail's pace. Even when the government would try to nourish the film industry with one hand, it would be strangling it with the other.

By stark contrast, Hong Kong was developing a viable and eventually powerful commercial cinema, a fact which has goaded many in Taiwanese film circles who often say, "If Hong Kong can do it, why not Taiwan?" After all, for a relatively small island, Taiwan has varied scenery with spectacular mountains, bountiful forests, beautiful coastlines, and even large plains on the western side of the island — all favorable conditions for filmmaking. Taiwan also has four times the population of the British colony. Once again, the answer is that the initial political and economic conditions, even up to the mid-1960s, were not conducive to developing a thriving film industry.⁷³ With the fall of China in 1949, only 5% of the Shanghai film community moved to Taiwan, while many times that number moved to the greater freedoms beckoning in Hong Kong. Furthermore, those who did relocate to Taiwan in 1949 were mostly in the Agricultural Education Film Company, a government-run studio that mainly engaged in documentary and propaganda work. This meant the arrival of a certain amount of equipment and technical personnel, but almost no creative talent to speak of.⁷⁴ It is not hard to see why any Chinese filmmaker, producer or star not directly connected to the KMT government would either stay in Shanghai, or move to the stable and free environment of Hong Kong. In 1949, Taiwan held no prospects for long-term stability; even the KMT saw the island as merely a temporary base from which they were to one day retake the mainland.

For the first fifteen years, Taiwanese cinema remained more of an itinerant roadshow than a real film industry. The ROC government was more concerned with avoiding a repeat of the scenario of the Shanghai film world in the 1930s — when the Left gained ascendancy over the Right. Thus, unlike the colonial government in Hong Kong, the KMT favored strict control of whatever film “industry” existed, starting with oversight from the China Association for Literature and the Arts set up in 1950. The KMT government directly supervised every private film company and film organization in Taiwan. Any head of a public organization pertaining to film in Taiwan was invariably a member of the party. The constant prescriptions from the GIO dictated a strong anti-communist stance, plus the anti-“Red,” “Black” and “Yellow” principles.

The crux of the matter was that film was not afforded the same respect as other industries. The film industry was declared a “special” industry and was squeezed for all it could yield. Never exceeding 30% anywhere else, in Taiwan entertainment taxes ran up to 60%. Stamp taxes on film tickets were eleven times higher than those in any other industry. More importantly, customs duties on imported film equipment, whether for production or exhibition, were all counted as “luxury items” and thus exceeded that of other industries by over 50%.⁷⁵ This latter policy was to have a profound effect on the industry in the long run, most of all because it forced producers in Taiwan to cut corners with film stock. Moreover, it would affect even the leading studio, the Central Motion Picture Company (hereafter the CMPC), which was formed in 1954 by combining the existing Agricultural Education Film Studio and the Taiwan Film Company (*Tai ying*), a holdover from the Japanese era.⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, the CMPC was under the direct control of the KMT party.

As a result of tight governmental control, many documentaries and propaganda shorts were made, but almost no fictional features. Those that were produced were primarily for propaganda, not entertainment nor cultural enlightenment. The few features made in the 1950s were all box-office disasters. Audiences were unmoved by their stereotypical characters, clumsy avoidance of official taboos and crude production values. The first feature-length film, *Waking from a Nightmare*, was made using only 40,000 feet of expired Japanese stock leading to a fogging effect.⁷⁷ The second feature from the Agricultural Education Studio was *Together Forever*, an overt attempt at exorcizing the ghosts of the 228 Incident by presenting all rifts between *benshengren* and the newly arrived mainlanders as being Communist-inspired.⁷⁸ Sometimes the results were almost comical. One Taiwanese-language film from the 1960s involved a postal worker who at a key moment in the plot lost some mail. This, however, was cut out by government censors since it would supposedly harm the image of postal workers. This excision, however, left the film virtually incomprehensible.⁷⁹ A 1959 propaganda film, *General of the Flying Tigers*, spared no expense in depicting the training of Air Force pilots at the local Air Force Academy. Yet given the military’s requirement that no planes could be shown having

any problems or accidents, and no lives could be lost in the film's plot, the finished film lacked dramatic tension, losing its propaganda potential as well.⁸⁰ So extreme were government strictures that its own propaganda films were not allowed to show communist flags or insignias, nor even images of Mao.⁸¹ Government policies also hurt any potential audience outside of Taiwan: the distribution rights for *Waking from a Nightmare* could not be sold in Singapore, Malaysia or Hong Kong because of its overt anti-"Communist bandit" themes. All three territories had relations with the mainland to consider.⁸²

With production crippled, the growing number of Taiwanese theaters needed to be filled by somebody's products. Of the 600 to 700 films that could be screened annually, there were only two or three locally produced works in Mandarin available.⁸³ In Hong Kong, the commercial film industry was unfettered by such political and economic constraints and from the start its films were inundating Taiwan's screens. Between 1950 and 1954, a total of 662 Mandarin-language features were shown on the island's screens: most came from Hong Kong, a handful was older works from Shanghai and a mere thirteen were from Taiwan itself.⁸⁴ The ROC government did use access to its lucrative market as leverage, exerting some influence over Hong Kong cinema through the Hong Kong and Kowloon Cinema and Theatrical General Association (also known as the "Freedom Association") starting in 1953. This ensured that Hong Kong's films were politically palatable for the Taiwanese market.⁸⁵ Yet Hong Kong in turn was able to extract advantages from the Nationalist government. Most crucial was in 1956 when Hong Kong's Mandarin-language films were exempted from the existing quota system and reclassified as *guopian* (literally "national films"). In effect, Hong Kong's Mandarin-language films were now classified as a part of domestic production, giving their films unlimited access to the Taiwanese market. This policy further consolidated Hong Kong's domination of the Taiwanese market.⁸⁶ As Lu Feiyi aptly summarizes, "No matter what is the cause and what is the effect, what is certain is that the government, in trying to win over the Hong Kong industry, gave Hong Kong films unlimited access to the Taiwanese market. Hong Kong, seeing this opportunity, maximized its own production with Taiwan in mind, and this had a profound effect on the Taiwanese industry itself."⁸⁷

Other policies further abetted this situation. A key member of the Freedom Association, Huang Zhuohan, negotiated with the ROC government about the unreasonable customs duties on film stock and equipment. This led to new laws relaxing customs duties on imported film supplies for those companies associated with the Freedom Association in Hong Kong.⁸⁸ Any member of the association was allowed to import film stock and equipment into Taiwan for a six-month period, duty-free. While this was designed to encourage Hong Kong film production in Taiwan itself, early on filmmakers would submit a script for a two-hour picture, make only an eighty-minute film, and sell the remaining stock on the local black market. So widespread was this practice that in 1958 the GIO ended the duty-free policy for imported film stock, retaining it for film equipment alone.⁸⁹

Unexpectedly, the new policies yielded not more Mandarin films made in Taiwan, but instead the first major wave of films produced in the Taiwanese dialect. Although the government at this time hoped to supplant Taiwanese with Mandarin, its primary means of doing so was the education system, not cinema. The KMT had no problem in the meantime with Taiwanese-language films so long as they carried the correct propaganda messages, or at least did not run counter to the official line. Local producers in Taiwan could now get film stock from Hong Kong sources, thus bypassing exorbitant import duties. Between 1955 and 1959, a total of 178 Taiwanese-language films were made in Taiwan, more than three times those made in Mandarin.⁹⁰

One should not construe this as the beginning of a bona fide private industry, however. In fact, the object was not regular studio production so much as short-term speculation and exploitation by fly-by-night operators. The numbers may be somewhat impressive, but the films for the most part were not. Given that film stock remained a precious commodity, producers used as little as possible. Some simply dumped film stock on the black market, making the actual creation of films of secondary concern.⁹¹ The director of the first Taiwanese dialect film in 1956, He Jiming, did everything in his power to not have any outtakes. He rehearsed several times before shooting, and utilized the seven-to-eight feet of leader in every reel for empty transitional shots in the finished film. In the end he used only 9500 feet of stock with almost no outtakes.⁹² One of the most well-known directors of these Taiwanese-language films was Xin Qi, who has over ninety films in the local dialect to his credit. According to Xin, the determining factors were the high cost of film stock and lack of time: “The film we used for Taiwanese-language movies in those days was generally imported, or bought on the black market. One movie required 800 shots on average. With the high cost of film, we could not afford to waste it. Also, we were making so many movies — around 100 a year — that the time spent filming each was very short, about two or three days per movie.”⁹³ Even when more upscale Mandarin-language production emerged in the next decade, there would still be echoes of these same corner-cutting production practices.

There is no denying that the 1960s saw the beginning of a more bona fide film industry in Taiwan. Nevertheless, the 1950s laid the groundwork for all that followed, even the New Cinema in the 1980s. As shoddy as the production system was, Taiwanese-dialect films became a training ground for later industry talent such as Li Xing, who became the godfather of Taiwanese film directors. In the 1950s, the only healthy economic players in the local film industry were distributors such as the CMPC and the privately run Union (*Lian bang*). Distributors would eventually decide the long-term fate of the local film industry even in the 1980s. Government policies, Hong Kong’s early ascendancy in the local market, lagging indigenous film production, issues surrounding film stock and the burgeoning power of local distributors — for all the changes that Taiwanese cinema would undergo starting in

the 1960s, this same phalanx of issues would remain pertinent when Hou and the New Cinema began in the early 1980s. Indeed, the New Cinema might never have been born without these preconditions.

In 1963, the face of Taiwanese cinema was altered dramatically due to a confluence of events both within Taiwan and without. The “without,” once again, was Hong Kong. In that year, *Love Eterne* was released by the Shaw Brothers studio. A Mandarin-language opera film of a type known as *huangmeidiao* (Yellow Plum Opera), this film achieved monumental success at the time in Taiwan, and has retained cult status ever since. It played for a record 186 days in Taipei and took in more than NT\$8 million at the box office, beating all existing records. (Its achievement was not surpassed until Jackie Chan’s *Project A* [1983].) Hong Kongers began to call Taipei “a Crazy Man’s City” as a result.⁹⁴ *Love Eterne*’s economic impact on Taiwan was long-lasting. It highlighted the true importance of the Taiwanese market for Hong Kong. It also led many theaters in Taiwan to break their contracts with American companies and begin showing Mandarin films instead.⁹⁵ Furthermore, it jump-started a full-fledged private film industry when the director of the film, Li Hanxiang (aka Li Han-hsiang), suddenly moved to Taiwan, bringing with him technical and artistic talent plus big plans. Li was already the best-known Shaw Brothers director at the time, specializing in period films. Having already directed a large number of box-office hits for the studio, Li felt he was not being sufficiently rewarded for *Love Eterne*’s stupendous success. The rival Cathay Group saw its chance to lure Li away. However, since Li was still under contractual obligations with Shaw Brothers, he could not work directly for Cathay’s MP & GI studio without legal complications. Thus, Cathay, via Union in Taiwan, put up the funding for a major new studio based in Taiwan, and *Goulian*, or the Grand Motion Picture Studio, was born. Its head was Li Hanxiang himself.⁹⁶

The result was a film company of a size never before seen in Taiwan. Although it only made twenty films over a five-year period, Grand single-handedly raised production standards to new levels, developed personnel, established a star system, helped build better distribution abroad and encouraged other companies to set up similar studio facilities. It also created several film classics.⁹⁷ Indeed, it might have been the beginning of a film industry that could have overtaken Hong Kong’s, or at least been its equal. The chief financial backer was the Malaysian Chinese Loke Wan-tho, head of MP & GI. Loke apparently had plans of investing US\$5 million in the Taiwanese film industry until he died in a plane crash which many have since claimed altered the course of Taiwanese film history. Huang Zhuohan says: “If it were not for this crash, Taiwan’s Mandarin filmmaking would have entered a golden age and have risen to international standards. Instead, Hong Kong rose up alone ...”⁹⁸

Without its chief backer, Li was now left to his own devices and the Grand studio soon came to resemble United Artists in the 1920s, where the artists in

charge lacked financial discipline. There is no better example of Li's wastefulness than his 1965 production, *The Beauty of Beauties*, a historical costume picture of such extravagance that it took Li a year and three months to make, and devoured a NT\$23 million budget. The numbers on this film are staggering: 42 sets, 6000 costumes, 30,000 props, 8,000 horses, 120,000 extras (provided by the military), 334 working days, 800 chariots and 120,000 feet of film stock. It was the local box-office champ of 1965, yet it only made back about NT\$5 million in its first run, since tickets were still quite cheap.⁹⁹ The Grand Motion Picture Studio never recovered from this financial blow. Still, a bona fide private industry in Mandarin filmmaking was sparked by all this activity. Union, the distributor of films from Grand, began producing films itself, starting with King Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn*.¹⁰⁰ The coup of enticing King Hu to Taiwan would eventually result in his 1970 classic, *Touch of Zen*, the only Chinese-language film to make a mark on the highest arenas of the international film festival scene before the 1980s.

But nagging questions emerge: is this truly a chapter in Taiwanese film history, or merely an extension of Hong Kong's? The simple fact is that the private film industry in Taiwan almost from the start became entangled with Hong Kong's. Huang Zhuohan, for example, straddled both places throughout his career. He established The First Film Company (*Diyi*) in Hong Kong, but had the production wing set up in Taiwan to make swordplay films starting in 1967.¹⁰¹ So intertwined were the finances, talent pools and political connections (even government-run studios engaged in numerous co-productions with Hong Kong companies), that it is often impossible to make a distinction between a truly "Hong Kong" film and a truly "Taiwanese" film during the 1960s and 70s. That all of them were classified as *guopian* naturally did not help, and Western observers were confused, too.¹⁰² Even to this day Taiwan and Hong Kong do not see eye to eye on this issue. Every history of Taiwanese cinema in Taiwan will mention the made-in-Taiwan classics of this era — *The Winter* (1967), *Touch of Zen* (1970), and *Four Moods* (1970) — and speak of them as Taiwanese films. At the same time, however, Stephen Teo's history of Hong Kong cinema discusses all three films as if they were Hong Kong productions, which is the common view there. Teo discusses Li Hanxiang, Loke and Grand as part of Hong Kong's cinematic history as well.¹⁰³ *Touch of Zen*, given its success at Cannes in 1975 with its special technical award, is particularly contentious.

To find truly "Taiwanese" films distinctive from Hong Kong, we mostly have to look at the government-run studios which also changed dramatically during this same period. In 1963, Henry Kong was chosen from the GIO as the new head of the CMPC. Kong's unexpectedly visionary tenure lasted nine and a half years, during which time he upgraded the studio's management structures, production facilities and theatrical chains. As a result of these changes, the CMPC became one of the leaders in the Taiwanese film industry. In 1963, Kong also saw a privately made, low-budget, half Mandarin, half Taiwanese-language film, *Our Neighbor*, directed

by Li Xing. This inspired Gong to hire Li to direct a new type of policy film which would be called “Healthy Realism.” The films in this trend were not numerically significant, but the three most significant works — *Oyster Girl* (1963), *Beautiful Duckling* (1965) (figure 1) and *The Road* (1967) — obtained box-office success on a scale no previous government-made film had achieved.¹⁰⁴ On the one hand, Healthy Realist films continued the government’s propaganda needs: their tenor reminds one more of Soviet socialist realism than Italian neo-realism, which Kong claimed was the model. These films were all shot only in Mandarin. They all presented a highly sanitized version of Taiwanese reality. Finally, they were heavily moralistic in tone, upholding traditional moral values while extolling government-led progress. Yet the Healthy Realist films were quite different from the propaganda films of the 1950s as they did deal with the common people in the countryside and their everyday concerns. There was a deeper implication to these films as well. The indigenous development of Taiwan was now a worthy topic in government-inspired pictures. For the first time, in other words, Mandarin films acknowledged Taiwan — or at least an idealized version of Taiwan. No longer were they mere purveyors of shrill anti-communist diatribes with messages of retaking the mainland.

With the CMPC, Grand and Union leading the way, the number of indigenously made Mandarin-language films in Taiwan increased twenty-fold over the decade of the 1960s. In the year 1960, only five Mandarin-language films were made in Taiwan. In 1964, there were twenty-two. By 1969, there were eighty-nine. The year 1969 was also the first year that their numbers surpassed the cheaply made counterparts in the Taiwanese dialect. By 1971, the numbers for Taiwanese-made Mandarin-language films had exceeded a hundred.

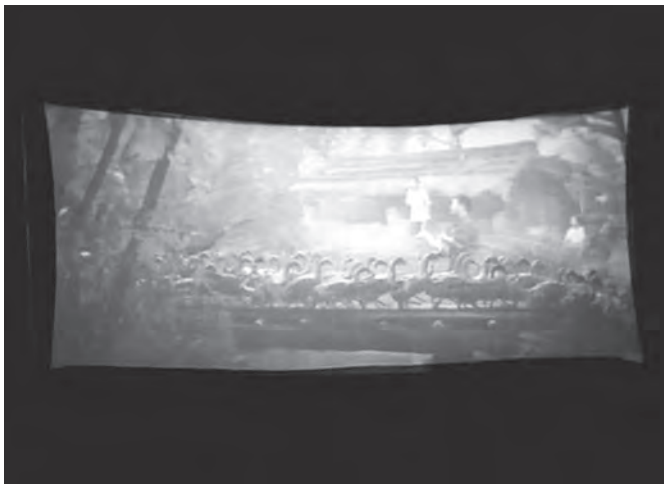


Figure 1 Images from *Beautiful Duckling* (1965) being screened outdoors in Hou’s *Dust in the Wind* (1986).

The rise of this film industry in the 1960s became part of the informal education of Hou Hsiao-hsien, who largely grew up in that decade. Yet this was not the education one would expect of a director known for making some of the most challenging narrative films in the world. Hou was not the most industrious student, often due to a lack of interest on his part. He did, however, educate himself in the available popular culture of the time. As Hou himself puts it, he rented and read every swordplay novel he could find, and when he could find no more, he read detective novels, popular adaptations of classic novels, translations of Western novels and even Qiong Yao novels when all else had been exhausted.¹⁰⁵ (In *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* he is even seen reading racy material in the privacy of the family commode.) Hou also had a voracious appetite for films early on, often sneaking into theaters (something seen in *The Boys from Fengkuei*), or gluing together old, torn ticket stubs found on the ground outside. He never saw as many films as when he was in the military, however, since his particular tour of duty (as an MP) left Hou with a lot of free time, and he would sometimes see up to four films in a single day.¹⁰⁶ Once Hou was discharged from the military, he then went to the National Academy of the Arts to study film. While attending the Art Academy in the late 1960s, he received minimal technical training due to limited facilities. Directing classes were basically courses on theatrical directing and nothing more.¹⁰⁷ But at least he saw more films, although less than one would expect at a “film school.”

Most of the films Hou saw were either from Hollywood or Hong Kong. The only film he has ever mentioned from this time was a British film he saw while in the service around 1967, the name of which in English is uncertain.¹⁰⁸ This obscure film got Hou more seriously interested in cinema, but according to him, it did not help him understand the medium any better.¹⁰⁹ When attending the Art Academy, Hou recalls his surprise when a teacher analyzed the visual motifs of a lesser work from Elia Kazan called *The Arrangement*.¹¹⁰ Thereafter, he says, he began to look at films differently, but still not as what one would expect. He remained steeped in popular culture, and remained ignorant of cinema in its more artistic and cultural manifestations. Only when he was about to become a director himself in the late 1970s did he finally begin to see more works from outside of Hollywood or Hong Kong. Once again, however, this was to minimal effect. When he saw Antonioni and other more experimental films, he could not really appreciate any of them.¹¹¹ Hou even claims that he fell asleep while watching Fellini during his early days as a commercial director.¹¹²

In truth, the real film education of Hou was not an education, but an apprenticeship which began the day he joined the film industry. Although it was not immediately evident, the best days of the commercial industry were already behind it by 1973, and a period of slow decline was already in progress. The signs were already there by the beginning of the 1970s with Grand no longer on the scene. Union would soon cease its production arm in 1974, leaving the CMPC as the only steady producer of

feature films in Mandarin. Starting in 1973, Taiwan-based Mandarin films slipped to between forty-five and sixty-six per year until 1977, while Taiwanese dialect films had disappeared altogether. Meanwhile, Hong Kong was still producing three times as many feature films as Taiwan was.¹¹³ Taiwan discovered it could not match the budgets, quality and marketing of Hong Kong, especially now that Bruce Lee had come onto the scene. Furthermore, the ROC government once again had made it much cheaper for Hong Kong companies to acquire and process film stock than it had for indigenous production companies.¹¹⁴

Generic classifications clarify this widening gulf. Hong Kong made many more actions films than Taiwan (or anyone for that matter). In Taiwan these were considered more expensive to produce as well as morally dubious by conservative elites. Lu Feiyi notes how over a third of the films made in Taiwan were instead classified as *wenyi* pictures.¹¹⁵ *Wenyi* has been translated as “romance” or “literary films,” and sometimes seems to include any kind of drama. Still, it is significant that Taiwan made a large number of *wenyi* films since they were much cheaper to produce than action pictures.¹¹⁶ Nobody better personified this trend than the prolific director, Liu Jiachang, who made nearly thirty films during the 1970s, including eight for the CMPC studio. Liu’s films tended to be quickly and crudely shot, and very stereotypical in their characterizations. Yet he transformed the *wenyi* genre by including many musical numbers, making these films even somewhat exportable.¹¹⁷

Central to the Taiwanese commercial industry was a sub-category of *wenyi* films that were known as simply “Qiong Yao films,” named after the author of the romance novels on which most of these were based. The trend seems to have begun with two successful Li Xing films made at the CMPC in the mid-1960s.¹¹⁸ By 1983, a total of forty-nine films were based on a Qiong Yao novel, and there were several Qiong Yao clones as well. Qiong Yao even set up her own production company in 1976, making, of course, only Qiong Yao films.¹¹⁹ Easily exportable to markets such as Singapore or Malaysia, these films are considered by many today grotesquely escapist. Healthy Realism made at least a failed attempt to deal with the realities of life in Taiwan; Qiong Yao films made no attempt whatsoever. If these films are to be believed, then everybody in Taiwan lived in spacious mountain retreats in *Yangming Shan* (a playground of the very rich in Taipei), everybody spent their time in Western-style living rooms, dining rooms and coffee shops, everybody aspired to be married in a Christian church, and everybody was so Westernized that the only trace of native culture was the occasional appearance of chopsticks, which in itself seems to be nothing more than an oversight by the continuity person. Brigitte Lin, who became a major star in Qiong Yao films before she defected to Hong Kong, bluntly said that these films were powerful precisely because they served as necessary illusions in a time when life was hard. In other words, they reflected not the realities of Taiwan, but an alternate universe everybody desired to escape to.¹²⁰

Yet another factor increased the economic pressures faced by the Taiwanese film industry over the 1970s. The diplomatic setbacks of the decade once more accented the importance of propaganda for the government. These political crises resulted in big-budgeted propaganda features sponsored by two successive heads of the CMPC during the decade, Mei Changling and Ming Ji. The father of Healthy Realism, Henry Kong, was replaced by a new head of the CMPC, Mei Changling. Mei promptly steered the party-run studio onto this path of expensive film projects.¹²¹ This included a wave of virulent anti-Japanese films that came out after Japan broke ties with the ROC in 1972. The definitive work was *Victory*, released in 1975. This film became number one at the box office and won best picture at the Golden Horse Awards, Taiwan's version of the Oscars. Its success was largely due to its open promotion by Chiang Ching-kuo himself.¹²² (In a sense this film was Taiwan's equivalent to the mainland's *The Red Detachment of Women*.) *Victory* exemplifies the government's hope to tap into popular culture for political ends. Its director, the never-sleeping Liu Jiachang, brought his pop proclivities to the aid of government propaganda. The film starred not only the godfather of Taiwanese policy films, Ke Junxiong, but also a very young Sylvia Chang (Zhang Aijia). Liu's main song "Mei Hua" (also the title of the film in Chinese) became a major hit both in Taiwan and mainland China. The song could be sung at any time in the plot, most tellingly by a young Taiwanese boy who witnesses his father being harshly mistreated by the Japanese during World War II. "Chinese kids never cry," the father — shackled, beaten, bloodied, patriotic — admonishes his son. "I'm sorry," the tearful son replies. His father then suggests, "Sorry? Then just sing!" By a miraculous glossolalia only possible under propagandistic expediency, the Taiwanese break out in song in perfect Mandarin, showing their undying aspiration to be Chinese by singing praises of China's national flower.

This tendency towards big-budgeted propaganda films reached its zenith after the loss of U.S. recognition and the Formosa Incident in late 1979. A number of films reflected fears of Taiwanese Independence, most of all a trio of films called "searching for roots" (*Xun gen*). The 1979 example of this trend, *The Source*, spends most of its energy on a nineteenth-century attempt at oil exploration in Taiwan (combined with a few carefully interspersed shots of the bubbly, bosomy persona of the wife of a Texan who is helping them). Yet the key message is a flashback at the beginning when the protagonist as a young boy first arrives in Taiwan: standing on the shore, he is reminded by his father that they came from China and they are there in Taiwan to help expand the frontiers of the great Chinese race. Other films were clearly government responses to the loss of U.S. recognition. Li Xing got into the act with his star-studded *Land of the Brave* (1981), which he made at the CMPC studio. This has an opening documentary-like montage showing on-the-street reactions to the American withdrawal, culminating in a staged sequence where locals glare at a young curly-haired, blond male walking happily with two nubile local women. He

sees their reactions and pulls out a sign that says, in Chinese, “I am Australian!” The theme song of this film, “We are Descendants of the Dragon,” became an officially sponsored rallying cry across the island, and once again, it was even popular in mainland China. The most notoriously expensive of these films, however, was *The Battle for the Republic of China* (1981). This film featured hyperbolic heroism, a large number of extras, some kung-fu by Ti Lung and a fire at the climax that rivals the burning of Atlanta in *Gone with the Wind*. Most audiences saw films such as this for free at public showings in schools or clubs; few, however, would think of paying to see them. As a result, such films were now putting even the CMPC deep in the red. Moreover, some have argued that the anti-communist/anti-Japanese genres had exhausted themselves by this point, calling into question such exorbitant financial outlays. From both a propagandistic and economic standpoint, such films faced rapidly diminishing returns.¹²³

It seems strange, if not impossible, that this is where Hou really learned the craft of filmmaking. It is even more mind-boggling that the lessons Hou learned in this land of low-budgeted Qiong Yao films, saccharine music, and hyperbolic and over-priced propaganda would have a lasting impact on his career, evidence of which is still visible in even his most recent films. Yet this is the case.

The long take is arguably the most definitive feature of Hou’s aesthetic. This is not, however, something he would have just learned from his early commercial days; rather, it is something he developed over time. The mean average shot length (ASL) for Taiwanese films from this period shows some differences from elsewhere, but not significant ones. The films sampled from the 1960s average out to around 10 seconds per shot. Using Barry Salt’s extensive analysis of ASL’s in other countries as a benchmark, Taiwanese films during this period were generally cut slower than American films, but were quite close to the mean in Europe.¹²⁴ In the Taiwanese films sampled from 1970 to 1977, the average shot length has come down to around 8 seconds per shot, thus coinciding with a trend towards faster cutting lengths elsewhere.¹²⁵ For the period 1978 to 1982, the ASL of the films remained almost identical at exactly 8 seconds per shot.

These averages do seem to reflect where directors first learned their craft. Even when operating in Taiwan, the two famed Hong Kong émigrés into the Taiwanese industry — Li Hanxiang and King Hu — cut their films more rapidly than their Taiwanese counterparts. For example, Li’s *Beauty of Beauties* comes in at 7 seconds per shot, while King Hu’s *Touch of Zen* is around 5 seconds. Li Hanxiang’s 1967 classic, *The Winter*, is a dramatic film in the vein of Taiwanese “Healthy Realism,” yet the mean shot length was under 7 seconds. Two of the most prominent Taiwanese directors, Li Xing and Bai Jingrui, tended to use longer takes on average. Two of Li’s works have an ASL of 12 seconds, seven are between 10 and 11.5 seconds, and four are between 9 and 10 seconds per shot. Bai Jingrui is even more consistent: of the six films of his sampled, five were between 9 to 10.5 seconds, and the only real

change was *The Coldest Winter in Peking*, which had an ASL of 11.5 seconds per shot. In 1970, all four of these directors collaborated to co-direct *Four Moods* in a last-ditch effort to revive the Grand Motion Picture Company. The longest ASL's among these four chapters belonged to the two Taiwanese directors, with Bai leading the way with over 10 seconds, and Li Xing coming in second at around 8 seconds per shot. The chapters by King Hu and Li Hanxiang, on the other hand, both came in under 6 seconds per shot.

This sampling from the 1960s to the early 1980s reveals an editing-based commercial cinema whose films were cut just a little slower than Hollywood's, and much slower than Hong Kong's. The Taiwanese commercial film industry was following worldwide trends in commercial filmmaking, yet always seemed to be "dragging its feet" in a sense. It was not a long-take cinema in search of its own style. It was instead a more functional editing practice based on economic expediency. Hou's pursuit of the long take, then, results from his trying to overcome the strictures of this environment.

Of course, Hou later distinguishes himself in other ways as well, and these were also affected by the negative lessons learned in this film industry. In terms of lighting and shot composition, few have ever matched Hou in complexity and density, if not sheer beauty. This seems even more surprising considering Hou's origins in the commercial film industry in Taiwan. There, both lighting and shot composition betrayed a decidedly low-budget mentality.

In the heyday of the commercial film industry, the lighting is remarkably uniform and functional, as opposed to expressive or artistic. These films were shot in an anamorphic format on color film stock, so a lot of light was needed, just as was the case for many Hollywood films a decade before. Yet there was little effort to shape or sculpt the lighting, or to soften it. Certainly little was done to explore shadows and darkness as was being done at the same time by *The Godfather's* Gordon Willis who has been called the "Prince of Darkness." These films would normally utilize flat lighting with hard-edged shadows cast by actors and inanimate objects alike, resulting in harsh lighting designs overall. One example is *The Ripening*, from 1970. In one scene the female protagonist enters her bedroom and walks over to a corner. When she nears the corner, her body casts hard-edged shadows on both walls (figure 2). Not only is there no clear motivation for the two light sources coming from two directions, the clearly defined shadows also exemplify a hard lighting design with no diffusion used. Since lighting is so time-consuming to begin with, and little time was available for these low-budgeted films, this comes as little surprise, especially since it was common in Hong Kong as well.

To compensate, directors in Taiwan resorted to a set of visual gimmicks, some of which apparently have Hong Kong origins. Consider the overuse of quick zooms. A 1980 Taiwanese-made kung fu film, *The Orientation*, features long stretches where



Figure 2 Hard, unmotivated lighting on both walls in *The Ripening* (1970).

nearly every shot contains a quick zoom. Zooms are not unusual in kung fu films, but zooms dominate Taiwanese non-martial arts films as well, whether one of the so-called “student films” by Lin Chingjie (i.e. *A Student’s Love* [1981]), a military propaganda film (*Teacher of Great Soldiers* [1978]) or a dramatic love story such as *Goodbye, My Love* (1970, dir. Bai Jingrui). Often the purpose of these zooms is to punctuate key dramatic moments so that they cannot be missed by audiences. In Bai’s *Love in a Cabin* (1974), for example, a series of quick zooms is used on both a father figure and the female star (Zhen Zhen) at the very moment he implores her to not date his son any more. In general, one would be hard-pressed to find a Taiwan-made film from this era that does not include at least a few quick zooms. Even Li Xing, known for his relative restraint, employs them for affective emphasis. In *Beautiful Duckling*, a rapid zoom-in occurs at the key moment an adopted daughter grabs her father and says she is still his real daughter. In *Rhythm of the Wave* (1974), a quick zoom leads to a flashback to emphasize a woman’s shameful past as a show girl. In *Story of a Small Town*, zooms stress a budding romance.

Another visual gimmick, however, seems to distinguish the Taiwanese even from Hong Kong. The wide anamorphic formats meant a much shallower depth-of-field. Rather than avoiding this, Taiwanese directors often flaunted this by including in the extreme foreground out-of-focus objects such as lamps, lights, vases, plants or tree branches. Sometimes these blurred objects would even partially obscure the view of the actor(s) in the mid-ground area. Examples of this practice are too numerous to count. A 1980 film, *Taipei, My Love*, includes a banquet scene where the lights are made to streak to an extreme in order to emphasize the romantic ambience. In the same year, *Love Comes from the Sea* includes a dancing scene where lights

in the extreme foreground are out of focus. Qiong Yao films in particular display this tendency, most of all in the romantic scenes. In the 1977 *Cloud of Romance*, for example, Brigitte Lin first declares her love for Chin Han in a coffee shop, with the foreground accented by the shining brass of table lamps, all blurred for a “romantic” effect. In *Love in a Cabin* this practice becomes “polymorphously perverse”: there are a plethora of objects ranging from neon lights, grates, fountains, candles and hanging beads, out of focus in the extreme foreground. A dance scene involving the star-crossed lovers in the namesake cabin features blurred-out candles in the extreme foreground that take up more space on the screen than the actors, nearly blocking the audience’s view of them (figure 3). The motivations for this widespread practice were also primarily economic: anamorphic formats resulted in wide compositions begging to be filled. Blurred objects in the foreground was a much cheaper and less time-consuming way to “beautify” or enhance the images than using expensive and time-consuming lighting of high quality, or more carefully wrought compositions and staging.

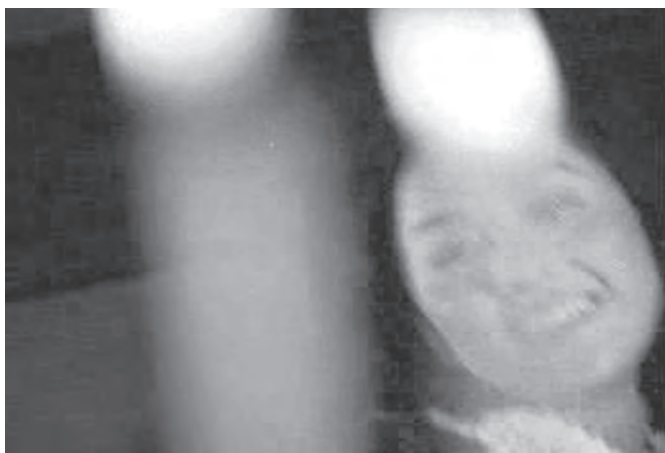


Figure 3 Gimmicky, shallow depth of field in *Love in a Cabin* (1974).

One other practice, however, best exemplifies what working in this industry meant for a director, one which in particular frustrated Hou. The Li Xing film, *The Heart with a Million Knots* (1973), is Hou’s first screen credit as he is listed as the continuity person. One scene illustrates a method of scene breakdown which epitomizes the Taiwanese film industry at this time. This takes place in a dining room. During dinner, a live-in nurse tries to convince her elder patient that his son is very filial, not disobedient as he believes. Despite having twenty-one shots, and despite so many of them being tied up with shot/reverse shots, only seven shots are from a repeated camera set-up used earlier in this scene. Whenever a new shot is “wide” — meaning farther away and often showing multiple characters — it is

always from an entirely new angle than the previous wide shot, somewhere else around this same dinner table.

This is unlike Hollywood where it has been common practice to shoot a master shot of a scene. This entails shooting the scene in its entirety from a wide angle that captures all of the action. Often several takes of this master shot are completed to ensure there is always one good take to use. After a master shot is done, the camera is then moved to several other places for all the cut-ins, close-ups, reactions shots, detail shots and so forth, a practice commonly known as “coverage.” The key is that, no matter what other shots are used in the final edit, there is always a master shot to fall back on which can be used for any re-establishing shot at any point in the scene. In Taiwan, however, there was never a master shot of an entire scene to begin with. For this reason, whenever there is a return to a wider shot, the crew could just as easily make it from a new camera set-up as from the original position since the two takes were being filmed independently in the first place. This would ensure some visual variety in the finished product as well. Furthermore, the lighting was so uniform that there appears to have been little, if any, tweaking of the lighting from one camera set-up to the next as would be the case in Hollywood, where directors of photography are notorious for “cheating” for each particular placement. This, in effect, would make a Hollywood director less inclined to use more set-ups, but poses no hindrance to Taiwanese directors who were satisfied with purely functional, flat lighting designs.

Once again, this shows the impact that Hong Kong had on the Taiwanese film industry. In Hong Kong they also did minimal tweaking of the lighting from shot to shot, and were just as apt to put the camera in just about every conceivable location in any one scene. David Bordwell has called this the “segment shooting” method of Hong Kong, where scenes are done from shot to shot from a variety of angles, and then edited together afterwards into a single scene without recourse to a master shot. The result is a wider variety of camera set-ups than is the norm in Hollywood where there is more of a tendency to return to the master shot during editing.¹²⁶ Why Hong Kong shot differently from Hollywood is clear: this was the most efficient way to create dynamic action scenes in a labor-intensive industry. In Taiwan, however, often this was being done for non-action scenes. Clearly demands for frugality with film stock determined why there was no master shot: it was just too expensive. In Taiwan, every effort was made to keep the shooting ratios to a bare minimum. 4-to-1 was considered extravagant, 3-to-1 to 2-to-1 was the norm. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was getting even lower yet. Hou himself was taught by another producer-director, Guo Qingjiang, how to get the shooting ratio under 2-to-1. He says that in one film (which he did not specify) he was able to get 11,000 feet of stock for the finished film out of a paltry 18,000 feet of exposed stock — a shooting ratio of 1.6-to-1.¹²⁷ Indeed, the ideal in this industry would have been a perfect 1-to-1 shooting ratio. What you would see is what they shot — and not a second more!

This ubiquitous modus operandi did not mean longer average shot lengths for these films as one might expect. In the early 1980s, for example, three films from Guo Qingjiang — according to Hou, the master of the low shooting ratio — had an ASL ranging from 5 to 7 seconds. However, given there was so little for the editor to work with, it is easy to see why these films for the most part were quite stilted in their pacing, or rough around the edges. One could find an occasional Taiwanese-produced film that was edited as quickly as early 1980s hits from Hong Kong like *Aces Go Places* (1982) and *All the Wrong Clues (for the Right Solution)* (1982), both of which average around 5 seconds per shot. But one cannot find any Taiwanese counterparts that are edited quite as crisply and dynamically. This was simply because Taiwanese producers did not have the luxury to leave much of anything on the editing room floor since no film stock could be wasted. It was precisely such hidebound methods which made Taiwanese-produced films so vulnerable to Hong Kong by the early 1980s.

What this meant for these films went well beyond simply their rhythm or pacing. Having their best moments left on the editing room floor was the least of an actor's concern in Taiwan. In fact, it was no small miracle if any of their best moments got recorded on film in the first place. According to Hou himself, who had ample experience with this practice, whenever closer shots were done for one character, the actor would not be talking to the other actor, but always to the clenched fist of the assistant director standing in front of him or her.¹²⁸ They never did a scene from beginning to end in a master shot; they only did this a shot at a time, with no real flow. Theoretically, what appeared in the finished product could very well be the only moments captured on film to begin with, although inevitable mistakes still would bring the shooting ratio to higher than one-to-one. Stopping and starting, halting in mid-emotion and emoting to clenched fists all stopped performances cold. Even Li Xing rarely got memorable performances, which is not surprising given the shooting methods employed: the piecemeal practice of shooting one line at a time leaves a sense that his films are but overwrought nodes of melodrama strung together on a perfunctory narrative chain. Perhaps as a means of disguising all this, Li Xing and others always had a steady supply of tears on hand. *Beautiful Duckling* ends with a young hooligan crying alone on the streets, realizing the error of his ways; *The Road* ends with a father full of tears of paternal pride for his filial and successful son. An archetypal ending in a Li Xing film (*The Sun Rises and Sets, He Never Gives Up, My Native Land*) is a bawling family surrounding a dying father as he delivers the requisite last words in between measured last breaths. The facile recourse to tears was not made by Li alone. Perhaps no cinema anywhere has had so many films end in a blubbing vale of tears.

In 1973, Hou started as a continuity person, but soon became an assistant director, and finally a screenwriter, first writing three works with his closest associate during the bulk of the 1970s, the director Lai Chengying. In Taiwan, directors rarely

did the actual directing; it was the assistant directors who actually faced the day-to-day problems on the set, and they were in charge of keeping film stock use to a bare minimum. Hou is listed as the assistant director for at least eleven films in the 1970s, and that experience drove home for him the limitations of current filmmaking practices. All of these practices mentioned earlier — functional editing, functional lighting, compositional gimmicks, minimal shooting ratios, start and stop performances — Hou would one day reject, but not on day one, nor even on day ten. Indeed, for years Hou would bear some personal responsibility for perpetuating these practices. (It was his livelihood after all.) Yet as strange as it may seem, his experience with these practices would have a profound and lasting impact on him even after he would no longer rely on this industry for work. He would learn many things from this largely negative experience, but two invaluable lessons stand out: the importance of lighting and the importance of performance, two areas today that form the cornerstones of his own aesthetic.

A key moment occurs when Hou scripted Li Xing's *Good Morning Taipei* (1980). The cinematographer was Chen Kunhou. Thereafter Chen and Hou formed a directing/writing/cinematography team. In the years before joining the New Cinema (1980–1982), the pair completed seven films together, with Chen officially directing four and Hou officially directing three (*Cute Girl* [1980], *Cheerful Wind* [1981] and *The Green, Green Grass of Home* [1982]). Hou was always the screenwriter, and Chen always the cinematographer, yet so close was their working relationship that critics at the time saw these films as co-directed projects. Therefore, unlike most New Cinema directors, Hou and Chen brought with them a wealth of experience from the commercial film industry. Chen and Hou shared ideas about reforming the production practices in the Taiwanese film industry which led to their reputations as mavericks. Some of their reforms would eventually have a direct impact on the New Cinema, most of all their collaborative relationship. They were the first to begin solving what they saw as inter-related problems: the paucity of film stock and the staleness of performances. In their first joint project, the Chen-directed *Riding a Wave* (1980), they reportedly used a “whopping” 35,000 feet of film stock at a time when nobody would dare go over 30,000.¹²⁹ For Hou's *The Green, Green Grass of Home*, they used between 40,000 to 50,000 feet of film stock, which was considered wasteful.¹³⁰ In time, this quest for higher shooting ratios became a joint crusade among New Cinema directors. Hou and Chen, however, had already pushed the envelope before the New Cinema existed.

Even the long take, which today most defines Hou, has direct links to his early experiences in the industry. Hou initially was not pursuing long takes as a conscious aesthetic strategy. They were a by-product of his quest for better performances. As an assistant director, Hou knew that existing practices needed to be changed. Nevertheless, he was bound to those methods in that position. Once he became a director himself, he began with the “novel” idea that a director should actually direct

on the set. Then he began to experiment with various ways of tweaking performances. Since neither Chen nor Hou had yet heard of any master-shot system, they found that performances in the existing segment-shooting method would be better served if each shot was longer to begin with. On occasion, relatively long takes seemed to Hou a practical way to give his actors more breathing room to perform. This was the very humble beginnings of one of the greatest long-take stylists in world history.

The early films bear this out. By the standards of the industry at the time, Chen was a long-take director, and Hou was even more so. For the twenty-five films sampled between 1980 and 1982, the average shot length comes out at 8.3 seconds per shot. However, Chen's 1982 film *Six Is Company* averages 10.3 seconds per shot, while Hou's *Cute Girl* is at 11.3 seconds, *Cheerful Wind* at 12.7 seconds and *The Green, Green Grass of Home* at 11.3 again.¹³¹ During this same three-year period, only Li Xing's *My Native Land* and Bai Jingrui's *The Coldest Winter in Peking* showed similar figures.

The style of these early works reveal the haphazard probes of a young director still searching for a new aesthetic within existing conditions. All three works were shot in the anamorphic format; all include a large number of zooms. In *Cheerful Wind* the two lovers (played by Kenny B and Feng Feifei) are out in a field in a single take of two minutes in length: the shot begins as a long shot and then zooms out to an even more distanced shot to show terraced fields and mountains behind them. By contrast, a restaurant scene of the Feng Feifei character talking with her aunt in *Cute Girl* suggests things to come: also around two minutes in length, this time the camera does not move at all. These examples notwithstanding, Hou was not yet consciously pursuing a long-take aesthetic. According to him, he would still shoot from other angles, but when a particular take was good from a wider angle, he saw no reason to use other shots from other set-ups. This would gradually become a habit.¹³²

This quest for better performances did not just affect how Hou shot scenes, it eventually had an impact on how he scripted and structured his films. After all, in his early days as a commercial director Hou still faced one nearly insurmountable obstacle: stars — or as Hou describes them, popular singers who could not act. These singer-actor wannabes were so image-conscious that Hou could do very little with them.

In his third commercial film, *The Green, Green Grass of Home*, however, Hou would have a major breakthrough with the children who perform with ease and aplomb. The most notable moment is when a young boy gets upset at his father for killing his pet owl. The composition in this fifty-five-second shot is quite striking, using strong staging in depth, with the father in the foreground while the young boy moves diagonally in the distance, kicking vegetables and yelling in a convincing fit of anger (figure 4). These child performances got Hou notice among critics for the first time. One described this film as a “warm tender depiction of the world of



Figure 4 Hou's complex staging in depth in *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982).

children done in a quiet way to appeal to the emotions, making the film refreshing and elegant and not at all following recent trends."¹³³ Hou says that he found it easy to direct children. He would never tell them when they made a mistake, but would always pretend that something was wrong with the lights, or that some crew member was at fault. (The crew members, in turn, all understood what Hou was after and would feign guilt.) The result was usually that the child actor would be even better on the second or third take.¹³⁴ The most important development was not the notoriety, however, but a new *modus operandi* Hou has refined to the present day: improvisation. Hou would only tell these children the situation and would otherwise let them improvise the actual lines of dialogue, something he could never do with stars such as Kenny B or Feng Feifei.¹³⁵ This method of directing, initially reserved only for children in *The Green, Green Grass of Home*, is today Hou's method with every actor: Hou usually provides situations, moods and a sense of the atmosphere — but no precise lines of dialogue or strict blocking instructions.¹³⁶

Given their innovations within the commercial cinema, it is easy to see why Hou and Chen Kunhou would be such a good match for the budding New Cinema movement. *The Green, Green Grass of Home* would prove to be their ticket in. Zhan Hongzhi, who would become one of Hou's closest collaborators, says that film was one of the sources of the New Cinema because of its ground-breaking, free-flowing narrative.¹³⁷ Edmond Wong claims that the success of this film encouraged the CMPC to try its new low-budget/more-artistic-freedom approach with *In Our Times*.¹³⁸ Before long, Hou and Chen would be called the "spiritual leaders" of the New Cinema.¹³⁹ Within this movement, Hou would forge a whole new set of relationships, some of which remain crucial for him to this day. What is so shocking about Hou's background is the dearth of outside influences, showing how thoroughly home-grown he is. Unlike other members of the New Cinema movement, he never went to a film school abroad, and he was woefully ignorant of many trends in world

cinema, including those many mistakenly have thought influenced him. Nowhere is this more clear than in the early comparisons often made between Hou and Ozu: contrary to what was already commonly assumed, Hou claims that he did not even see an Ozu film until after he had shot *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*.¹⁴⁰ And yet Hou, not these Western-trained filmmakers, not even Edward Yang, would end up being the true center of the New Cinema. His films would come to define the movement. Ultimately, this is because Hou had one thing more than any other: experience in every sense of the term. He had not only firsthand experience with a Taiwan which was changing before his eyes; he also had that day-to-day experience in the grind of the Taiwanese film industry. Together these gave birth to his illustrious career. Yet Hou could not do this without a lot of luck and help. He needed both friends and institutions to come to his aid. Fortunately, he became a director at just the right time: everything — Taiwanese society and Taiwanese cinema — would change even more dramatically in the 1980s. By the end of the decade both the man and the island were nothing like their 1980 selves. Sometimes timing is everything.