

## **Rural and Urban Dynamics in Taiwan New Wave Cinema— A Comparative Study of Films by Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang**

Larry Ling-hsuan Tung, Kean University

In the 1980s, a revamped film industry in Taiwan produced a number of international acclaimed films, marking the beginning of the Taiwan New Wave Cinema and putting Taiwan on the cultural map of the world. Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, the two most prominent directors in the movement, were born in the same year. However, they came from very different family backgrounds and both use their personal experience in their filmmaking. The dynamics in their films represents two very important elements in Taiwanese cinema – the struggles and challenges in urban and rural lives.

Taiwanese people are obsessed with metropolis and actively pursuing the myth of urbanism, with the tallest building in the world, a high-speed rail and expansion of subway systems. Meanwhile, as globalization dominates our everyday life, Taiwanese people also embrace Westernization, striving to learn English and adopting Western values. It is only natural that the audience is more likely to appreciate films with strong urban themes while rural stories are often deemed as boring and old-fashioned.

Although many of the new directors did receive their training in filmmaking in Taiwan, they are often under strong Western influence with further training overseas. It is very likely that we will see more urban directors rise in the coming years in the international circuit, such as Tsai Ming-liang, whose films always center around city life. However, since government funding for films has been institutionalized to support local film industry, films with rural flavors will have room for survival but will likely remain a minor player in Taiwanese cinema.

With the economic success in the 1970s from manufacturing and international trade, Taiwan's "economic miracle" put the island nation in the leading role of the "Four Asian Tigers." In the 1980s, a revamped film industry produced a number of international acclaimed films and put Taiwan on the cultural map of the world. It was the beginning of the Taiwan New Wave Cinema Movement. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, Taiwanese films have won many major awards in the international film festival circuit, including a best film award at the Venice International Film Festival (Hou Hsiao-hsien's "A City of Sadness") and a best director award at the Cannes Film Festival (Edward Yang for "Yi Yi"). Following Hou and Yang's footsteps, many younger Taiwanese directors emerged in the 1990s and the Taiwan New Wave Cinema went into full blossom with continued success on the stage of world cinema.

Cinema arrived in Taiwan in 1901 during the first decade of Japanese colonization (1895-1945). For the first 20 years, Japanese-made documentary and feature films dominated the market while many Taiwanese talents were excluded. The first Taiwanese film, "Whose Fault Is It?" came into light in 1925 but was tightly controlled by the Japanese. The industry was interrupted in 1937 by the Sino-Japanese War and only resumed in 1945 after the

Chinese Nationalist government took over the island. Throughout the 1950s, the industry was dominated by the government-subsidized Mandarin and Taiwanese films. But in the 1960s, the government's Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC) introduced "Health Realism" melodrama, which featured positive attitudes towards traditional moral values as kung-fu movies also blossomed alongside. In addition, romance movies, usually based on the stories by Chiong Yao, a female novelist, also played a major role in the market and the popularity continued into the 1970s.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the movie industry in Hong Kong peaked and quickly gained immense popularity in Taiwan, becoming the mainstay of the film market. Seeking new ways to compete against the Hong Kong films, CMPC hired four young directors and made "In Our Times," which is composed of four distinct episodes, in 1982. The film is a review of social change in Taiwan, which was going through vigorous industrialization and cultural evolution. It is considered the starting point of the New Wave Cinema Movement.

In 1983, "Growing Up" directed by Chen Kunhou and co-produced by Hou and another film "The Sandwich Man" (co-directed by Hou) attracted a lot of attention. The two films are considered the hallmark of the movement and the New Wave Cinema began to develop rapidly.

#### *Hou Hsiao-hsien*

Hou is considered the pioneer and the face of Taiwanese national cinema. Born in Guangdong Province, mainland China, he moved to Taiwan with his family in his infancy and grew up in a Hakka village in southern Taiwan with heavy influence from the Taiwanese grassroots culture. His earlier work, including the strongly autobiographical "The Boys from Fengkuei," "A Time to Live and A Time to Die," and "Dust In the Wind" portrayed the struggles of rural life in Taiwan in the 1950s and the 1960s. He drew on a lot of his personal experience in his filmmaking and storytelling, which were clearly reflected in his earlier works and formed a unique style.

His later films, including "A City of Sadness," "Good Men, Good Women," and "The Puppetmaster," or his so-called "Taiwanese Trilogy," touched on political subjects such as Taiwan's colonial past, the 228 Incident, and the white terror era. Although Hou is not considered a native Taiwanese because of his family origin and his birthplace, he is extremely interested in Taiwan's history and grassroots culture but also deals with the complicated links and division between Taiwan and mainland China. Bernice Reynaud wrote in her book, *A City of Sadness*:

While totally Chinese, his films had a distinct Taiwanese flavor and atmosphere and created a world quite different from the "China" that Western audiences had been introduced to by Fifth Generation mainland filmmakers...The "sadness" of the title alluded to the troubled years between the end of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan in 1945 and the official takeover by the Nationalist Party of Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. (2002, p. 8)

*Edward Yang*

While Hou focused on the struggles of rural life, Edward Yang is an expert on urban diaspora. Born in the same year as Hou in Shanghai, mainland China, Yang moved to Taiwan with his family when he was two years old, and was raised in Taipei. An engineering major in college, Yang got a Master's degree in Computer Science from the University of Florida in order to please his family. But his real passion is in film. So he soon entered the film school in the University of Southern California but dropped out after just one year because he was feeling disenchanted by the program's heavy business focus. After a successful seven-year career in the computer industry in Seattle, he went back to Taiwan to work on a script and in production. He soon attracted a lot of attention from the local movie industry with films such as "In Our Time" (1982), "That Day, on the Beach" (1983), "Taipei Story" (1985), and "The Terrorizer" (1986).

"His films express the confusion, anxiety, and sheer beauty of societal transformation. Yang also equates the macrocosmic and microcosmic, making the lives of his characters stand in for the greater, less visible processes of social change," wrote Saul Austerlitz in his essay on Yang for *Sense of Cinema* (2000).

His 1991 film, "A Brighter Summer Day," received international acclaim, winning major awards in Tokyo International Film Festival, Asia-Pacific Film Festival, Festival des 2 Continents in Nantes, France, and the Golden Horse Award (the Academy Award for Chinese-language films mostly from Taiwan and Hong Kong). His other movies from the 1990s, "A Confucian's Confusion" (1994), "Mahjong" (1996) also won numerous international awards. In 2000, his latest film, "Yi Yi," which tells a story about a dysfunctional family in Taipei, won him a Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival.

*Taiwan's Road to Industrialization and Democracy*

Taiwan, a small island with 23 million people, has come a long way in the second half of the 20th century. As Tonglin Lu (2002) wrote in his book "Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China":

Taiwan had been transformed, first from a traditional agricultural society to a labor-intensive, export-oriented, industrial society in the 1970s, then to a high-tech based consumer society in the 1980s. The long process of industrialization, which has lasted for centuries in the West, was condensed into an amazingly short period...Beneath the dazzling prosperity, Taiwan's economic miracle came at a high price. In its effort to modernize Taiwan's economy, the Nationalist government has heavily relied on American support and Western investments. Furthermore, in Taiwan as in many other third world countries, modernization, partly because of its intimate connection with technology, in many ways is equivalent to westernization, depending on which part of Western culture is taken as a model. (p.118)

With strong influence from its colonial past and support from the West, people in Taiwan strive for economic and political advancement while trying to keep their traditions and values and learn from the West. As Lu (2002) continues in her book, Taiwan has its own dilemma.

The government's reliance on Western (especially U.S.) investment and its single-minded focus on rapid economic development have often worked to the detriment of other areas, such as ecological preservation and cultural continuity...These changes have created a sense of loss among local peoples, despite the relative improvement of living standards. (p. 209)

### *Hou vs. Yang*

Born in the same year, both Hou and Yang are the so-called "Waishengren" in Taiwan, meaning "people from other provinces" because of their family origin (Anyone whose family arrives in Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War are generally considered Waishengren, regardless of his or her birthplace). However, because of their early relocation to Taiwan, they have no memory of mainland China. But their childhoods provide very different experience from each other. Hou, who grew up in a Hakka village in southern Taiwan, presents himself with more Taiwanese traits, such as the ability to speak the Taiwanese dialect fluently. Meanwhile, Yang, who grew up in Taipei, where the majority of Waishengren reside, appears to have more traits of Waishengren. This observation is mostly gathered from their mannerism and their accents in Mandarin. In Taiwan, Waishengren only comprise about 15 percent of the entire population but had controlled the government for more than half a century.

One of the most important characteristics in the Taiwan New Wave Cinema is that most directors worked from their personal experience in the early stages of their careers. With no exception, the earlier works by Hou and Yang reflect that characteristic. In their book, titled "New Chinese Cinema," Kwok-kan Tam and Wimal Dissanayake wrote:

Hou is interested in repossessing childhood memories and cinematizing the countryside. In some of his work, nostalgia for the past is elevated to a condition of redemption. Yang, on the other hand, is concerned with the convulsion of urban life and its dark underside. How the complex imperatives of urbanism press on groups of human beings engaged his deepest interest. To say that Hou is interested in the countryside and Yang is in the city, of course, to simplify their art and reduce their intentions. Both of them do much else. There is a healthy competition and cooperation between these two gifted filmmakers, and it is interesting to note that each has acted in the other's movies. (1998, p. 60)

Hou's famous "Taiwan Trilogy," including "A City of Sadness" (1989), "The Puppetmaster" (1993), and "Good Men, Good Women" (1995), is the perfect examples of Hou trying to find Taiwan's identity through history. As Taiwan is still trying to come to terms with its historical wounds, such as the division created between Waishengren and native Taiwanese by the 228 Incident, when tens of thousands of native Taiwanese were reportedly killed by the Nationalist troops, Hou believes that only when Taiwanese people learn from past mistakes that they can find common grounds and move on (Hou's films are mostly political and he often speaks about Taiwanese politics publicly although he claims to have no political color).

Partly to overcome the sense of loss, Hou in his films often searches for a new identity through the indigenous past, in the midst of the changing world (Lu, 2002, p. 209).

In an interview, Hou said he made “A City of Sadness” not for the sake of opening up old wounds, but because it’s vital that we face up to this incident if we are to understand where we come from and who we are as Taiwanese. The traditional way has always been to cover domestic scandals, to pretend they never happened, but I am not at all persuaded that that’s a good thing. My own feeling is that problems must be acknowledged and discussed if we are ever to resolve them in our minds. (Lu, 2002, p. 60)

### *National Identity through History and Nation Building*

Taiwan has always been a relatively restless place throughout history. Originally a place where most of its residents were of Polynesian origins, the first large group of Chinese started to migrate there about some five hundred years ago. After that the island went through invasion by the Dutch before falling into the hand of the Japanese after the first Sino-Japanese War in the 1890s. Even now after almost six decades of separation from mainland China, Taiwan is still facing possible military attack from mainland China, which warns that it would use force if the island officially declares independence. Taiwanese people have always been on a quest to find self-identity. Hou believed that it is history that made Taiwan what it is today.

As June Yip wrote about “the Puppetmaster” in her essay “Constructing a Nation”:

While *City of Sadness* depicted the years following the end of the Japanese occupation, this film probes even further into Taiwan’s past, focusing on the fifty years of the occupation itself. Since the lifting of martial law, there has been a revival of interest in Taiwanese life during the Japanese occupation, a period that was seldom, if ever, discussed under the Guomindang dictatorship. Hous-Hsiao-hsien’s film is among several recent films that have sought to reexamine the island’s Japanese era and its lasting impact on Taiwanese life. Hou has expressed his belief that, in order to truly understand how Taiwan came to be what it is today and to gain a secure sense of belonging, one must dig beneath the many layers of the island’s complex past. (1997, p. 152)

With the end of martial law and the emergence of an increasingly democratic society, Taiwan is poised at an extraordinary moment in its history. Sociopolitical liberalization and the end of Guomindang censorship has finally allowed Taiwanese to take an active role in asserting their own identity as a people. The restoration of the island’s “forgotten” historical experiences has been a critical part of the ongoing process of self-definition. Hou Hsiao-hsein’s “Tawain Trilogy” - and similar films that have been made in recent years-have greatly contributed to the reexamination of Taiwanese history from which has emerged an entirely new picture of the Taiwanese

“nation,” one that challenges the Nationalist myth of Chinese consanguinity by revealing the complex multiplicity of heritage that make up contemporary Taiwanese identity. (p. 160)

In Hou’s movies, language also plays an important role in the characters’ identifies and backgrounds. One of the biggest divisions among Taiwanese society is that people in the countryside speak mostly the Taiwanese dialect while the people in the city speak mostly Mandarin. In addition, people who grew up during the Japanese colonial era still have a fondness for the Japanese language. During the 50 years of the Nationalist rule, the Taiwanese dialect was discouraged and Mandarin is considered the proper official language. The linguistic differences represent class, education and politics, which were clearly illustrated in Hou’s films and is still one of the most controversial issue in Taiwan. In Lu (2002)’s book, she wrote:

Hou has been interested in searching for a Taiwan identity in his films. His works, usually set in either a rural area or a small town in the less industrialized South, focus on personal histories in which family ties play an important role. As a result, his films seem closely related to traditional culture, which is broadly defined as Chinese. At the same time, various groups in his films often use different languages: Taiwanese, Mandarin, Cantonese, and occasionally Japanese. All these diverse cultural components contribute to forming a concept of a hybrid identity, suitable to the current population in postcolonial Taiwan. (p. 18)

In Tam and Dissanayake’s book (1998), they also pointed out the powerful impact that languages have on one’s identity.

In *A Time to Live and A Time to Die*, the director also makes use of linguistic diversity to great effect. The voiceover by the eldest son is in a southern-accented Mandarin, indicating that it is a second language for the narrator. His younger brothers, who have grown up on Taiwan, speak a purer Mandarin. The grandmother and mother speak a Cantonese dialect which the children understand but do not themselves speak. As Chris Berry observes, a space criss-crossed by a specific and intricate network of nuanced and subtle difference. (p. 50)

*Urban Discourse: Lost in the City*

Moving into the 21st century, Taiwan has become a highly urbanized society. With a territory approximately of the size of Massachusetts and a population of 23 million, most Taiwanese are living in cities. Economically, Taiwan heavily relies on international trade because of its lack of natural resources. Militarily, Taiwan mainly relies on the U. S. for arm purchase and, as many Taiwanese hope, protection from China’s aggression. As the world becomes more international, the island has to reach out. Westernization seems to be inevitable. Just like in any major city, Taipei faces many common problems and the people in the city also face similar problems in life, such as anxiety, stress and a sense of lost in the hustle and bustle. Yang used his first-hand experience as a Taipei resident and addresses

many jarring issues behind the glamorous city life in his films as tradition and value are constantly challenge by the fast-paced life in Taipei.

In Lu's book, she wrote:

As in Yang's films, tradition, which often functions as an empty signifier, has become the symbol of homeless modernity... Edward Yang's works are always about Taipei, the modern city. In his films, the city often appears detached from its past, and its human inhabitants are submerged in an ocean of gigantic machinery, impersonal high-rises and indistinguishable streets. Traditional family ties are subverted by the worship of money, which has created an increasingly alienating atmosphere. (2002, p. 18-19)

As Yang's films demonstrate, the radical break from the past of local people has left an empty space in their lives, one that cannot be refilled by material wealth. Although the Nationalist government has praised traditional Chinese culture from the very beginning of their settlement in Taiwan, this culture, thus sanctified, has the luster of an object preserved in an Orientalist museum. (2002, p. 210)

Westernization has always been an issue of discussion in Yang's films. While criticized for being too Westernized by his critics, given his extensive experience living in the U.S. and the urban theme in his films, Yang successfully portrays the struggles between tradition and Westernization, or rather, "Globalization." Tam and Dissanayake wrote:

The secondary love story in 'That Day, On the Beach' has the effect of focusing the audience's gaze on the interplay between traditional values and Westernization, and the increasing penetration of American culture values into the lives of the rising generation. The story of the film is told by Jia-li to Ching-ching, through the use of flashbacks within flashbacks. The disjointed and fragmented nature of the film mirrors the disconnections, and it suggests as well the ensuing laceration of bonds between human beings. In this film, the complexity of form echoes the complexity of the social vision. (p. 60)

Meanwhile, another tradition that is being challenged is the influence of Confucianism in today's Taiwanese society. Unlike China, which went through the Culture Revolution, Taiwan managed to keep its Confucianism influence through education. But as the island become more "Westernized," the issue of individualism arise and the younger generation often find themselves in the middle of a struggle between being modest and pursuing self-expression. Tam and Dissanayake (1998) continue in their book:

A Confucian Confusion' is a comedy that connects in an interesting way to the current debates on human rights and their applicability to the life of Asian societies...The story takes place in Taipei, and among the characters are a group of young people with a primarily modernist outlook, who are caught in the cross-fire of traditional and contemporary values. The conflict between group loyalty and individual fulfillment that assumes ever greater importance in the film is portrayed

with a sardonic wit...The meaning of individuality is a question repeatedly raised in the film, and it is not without significance that the Chinese title of the film means "Age of Autonomy." (p. 67)

In "Yi Yi," one of his most celebrated films and also his last film, Yang told a story of a troubled family that encompasses a wide range of common issues challenging city slickers from all walks of lives and of different ages. The film was considered the Chinese version of "American Beauty" by some critics but is far more sophisticated. It underscores the sense of loss in the busy, sometimes chaotic city life, which oftentimes have an effect on our perspectives.

In an essay for *Senses of Cinema*, George Wu (2001) wrote:

The reflections do not just set up divisions between what the characters know and do not know, but also show that the world is a much bigger picture than any one perspective can attain. After Min-Min has a breakdown, NJ closes the blinds, turning their bedroom window into a black mirror reflecting the heavy traffic below. It is a shot of breathtaking beauty, but it also indicates that their story is but one of millions in the city. Yang also frames these reflective shots so we never forget that lives do not go on in a vacuum, but in a community: Min-Min has a quiet moment to herself in her office while immersed in the reflection of a cityscape...Yang has investigated the effects of capitalism and modern mores on a Taiwanese society that has valued ancient traditions until very recent times. In *Yi Yi*, Yang both indicts the ruthlessness of modern times and pokes fun at tradition (para. 9).

### Conclusion

As Hou and Yang continue to lead Taiwan's New Wave Cinema into the 21st century, their works inspired many younger directors in Taiwan. As Taiwan becomes more urbanized and international, the urban theme will most likely remain strong in Taiwanese films. Like many other people in Asia, Taiwanese people are obsessed with metropolis and actively pursuing the myth of urbanism, with the tallest building in the world and a high-speed rail and the expansion of subway systems. Meanwhile, as globalization dominates our everyday life, Taiwanese also embrace Westernization, striving to learn English and adopting Western values. It is only natural that the audience is more likely to appreciate films with strong urban themes while rural stories are often deemed as boring and outdated.

As Lu (2002) wrote in the epilogue in her book, she calls for a balanced exchange between the East and the West:

As Edward Said notes in his path-finding work with *Orientalism*, the West invented the East as a convenient Other to redefine itself in the midst of imperial expansion. The residue of this invention still remains as influential as ever in the era of globalization. (p. 211)

This book also has intended to point out the hidden "white mask" - to borrow Frantz Fanon's expression - which these films as well as ourselves have internalized as part



of the discourse of modernity. We need to recognize the existence of this mask in order to remove it... Only then will it be possible to break out of this circle of self-Othering and self-reinventing according to the orientalist images of the East provided by the discourse of modernity. Only then will it be possible to conduct cultural exchanges on a more balanced basis, instead of using the West as the ultimate reference point for modernity. (p. 211-212)

Lu's concerns and cautions might apply to the Chinese film industry, which also enjoys international acclaim because China still remains an agricultural society with much less Western influence. But given Taiwan's economic and political situation, there is no turning back on Westernization, and, in many ways, it is a norm in everyday life in Taiwan.

Although many of the new directors did receive their training in filmmaking in Taiwan, they are often under strong Western influence with further training overseas. It is very likely that we will see more urban directors rise in the coming years in the international circuit, such as Chih-yen Yee and Tsai Ming-liang, whose films are always centered around city life. However, since government funding for films has been institutionalized to support local film industry, films with rural flavors will probably have room for survival but will likely remain a minor player in Taiwan cinema.

#### References

- Lu, T. (2002). *Confronting modernity in the cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Nornes, A., & Yeh, Y. (1994). *Narrating national sadness: Cinematic mapping and hypertextual dispersion, cinemaspaces*. Retrieved December 10, 2007 from: <http://cinemaspaces.berkeley.edu/Papers/CityOfSadness/behind2.html>
- Reynaud, B. (2002). *A City of Sadness*. London, United Kingdom: British Film Institute.
- Tam, K., & Dissanayake, W. (1998). *New Chinese cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wu, G. (2001, April). *Yi Yi: Both a One and a Two. Senses of Cinema*. Retrieved December 15, 2007 from <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/yi-yi.html>
- Yip, J. (1997). *Constructing a nation: Taiwanese history and the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien. transnational Chinese cinemas: Identity, nationhood, gender*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.