

No Man an Island

The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien

Second Edition

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Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam Road
Hong Kong
www.hkupress.hku.hk

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ISBN 978-988-8139-22-4 (*Paperback*)

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Hong Kong

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Introduction

The Problem of Hou Hsiao-hsien

One of the most remembered adages from Rudyard Kipling is the notion that East is East, and West is West, and never shall the twain meet. Many today would prefer to see this oft-quoted phrase as nothing more than a quaint post-colonial hangover, even believing themselves immune to such blatantly essentialist, Orientalist terms. But one has to wonder.

Take for example, what many critics have said about the Taiwanese film director, Hou Hsiao-hsien. Godfrey Cheshire explains Hou's turning away from plot and character, and focusing more on objects and settings, as a return to a long-standing, older tradition in Chinese art and culture.¹ Jean-Michel Frodon claims that Hou is proof that there is no Chinese montage, that here lies a cinematic model which calls into question the system of Griffith and Eisenstein, instead basing itself on an alternative world view that treats oppositions (i.e. space/time, reality/representation) in an entirely different fashion.² Jacques Pimpaneau says Hou faces the age-old problem of every Chinese filmmaker: using a medium that is based on Western realism when the dramatic traditions in China are pretty much the opposite of realism. Pimpaneau says Hou is not the first to grapple with this issue, but few have expressed a Chinese cultural view of the world so deeply in film as he has.³

Such culturally essentialist ideas have crept in even the more nuanced academic writings on Hou. Even this writer once declared that Hou's "historical posturing" and "sense of artistic intuition" are both very Chinese.⁴ Less surprisingly, scholars from mainland China have tried to accentuate how Chinese Hou supposedly is. One writer, Ni Zhen, says this: "Hou Hsiao-hsien's systematic and highly stylized cinematic prose expresses very incisively and vividly the ethical spirit of Confucian culture and the emotional attachment to one's native land typical of the Orient."⁵ Li Tuo sets out to demonstrate that Hou's *City of Sadness* is difficult for people to understand because of its "non-logical editing" that stands apart from hegemonic Hollywood/Western narrative norms.⁶ Meng Hungfeng explains Hou's long-take/static-camera/distanced-framing style in terms of the Chinese aesthetic concept of "*yi jing*" whereby people, objects and settings are

blended together in a continuous space, thereby preserving the mood and feelings of a scene in a poetic fashion.⁷

So what is the problem here, especially when considering that these comments are not meant to justify the “White Man’s Burden” of imperialism, but seemingly the opposite? First off, every film director is a problem of sorts. At the very least is the need to explain why a group of films directed by the same person display certain regularities, irregularities — or both — across a directorial career. In the case of the Hou, however, we have not so much a problem as a misrecognized problem. All can agree that his films are among the most difficult to grace the planet over the last three decades. Hou’s films mostly defy those putatively postmodern compromises where the categories of art cinema and popular cinema become increasingly amalgamated, usually in the name of greater accessibility, or possibly at the behest of some nebulous “zeitgeist” which nobody can quite define. If anything, Hou’s films have remained defiantly less accessible, challenging, cryptic, and prone to such charges as “elitism,” “pretentiousness” and “self-indulgence.”

Where people go astray is that many, especially critics, seem to imply that this is primarily a problem of culture, and only secondarily of place, or even history. All Hou requires, it would seem, is personal sensitivity directly in tune with an inert cultural heritage, as if it could have happened anywhere: Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong or maybe even some dingy corner of some Chinese diaspora locale. In the existing critical literature on Hou, Taiwan is often treated more as background material, as biographical and geographical filler. Taiwan becomes almost an accident, if not a matter of inconvenience. J. Hoberman once noted the implications of this in the 1980s when writing about a Hou retrospective in New York: “New French or German directors are taken as a matter of course; one almost has to apologize for introducing a major talent from a backwater like Taiwan.”⁸ Perhaps today “backwater” is too strong of word given the long-standing prestige of Hou and other Taiwanese directors on the world festival scene. Still, Taiwan itself remains of secondary importance in the minds of many who admire Hou. Instead, they have often found recourse in a ready-made solution to the Hou “problem”: traditional Chinese culture.

But how much can culture by itself explain the odd trajectory of Hou’s entire career, something recognized as being unusual, perhaps even unprecedented? In 1979, Hou was an unknown scriptwriter and assistant director languishing in the commercial film industry of Taiwan, an industry that, like the island itself, did not have much of a reputation on the world stage, and both of which saw a grave crisis looming on the horizon. By stark contrast, in 1989 Hou was standing at the victor’s podium of the Venice Film Festival, his hands clasping the prestigious Golden Lion award, solidifying not only his status as one of the world’s cinematic masters, but also Taiwan’s place on the map of world cinema even as its commercial sector lay in near ruins.

By the end of 1999, despite the increasingly dismal performance of Taiwanese films at home, Hou had proven himself to be more than a passing phenomenon: an international survey of film organizations listed no less than three titles of his among the top twenty-five films worldwide for the entire decade of the 1990s;⁹ a survey of over fifty critics by *The Village Voice* declared Hou the best director of the same decade;¹⁰ entire books in French, Japanese, and Chinese were now published about him; even those who disliked his films felt compelled to discuss them at length. A Taiwanese scholar, Yeh Yueh-yu, summarizes Hou's current status: "By the end of the 20th century, Hou was rewarded with an unprecedented recognition that no other contemporary Chinese filmmakers ever enjoyed in the West."¹¹

With all of these stunning twists and turns in his career, one has to wonder how much traditional culture can hope to explain it: either this culture is not so inert given such dramatic changes over three decades, or there are other factors which have to be accounted for. Then again, it could be both a dynamic, malleable culture in conjunction with numerous other factors together created this unique body of films unified by the only thing which has not changed: the moniker "Hou Hsiao-hsien." It appears this problem is not as easily resolved as that.

Not only does culture alone not explain everything about Hou, it also raises several deeper questions that should cause us to be wary of over-reliance on such cultural explanations: the question of underlying motivations, the question of unexamined assumptions, and most all, the question of Taiwan itself. The latter is particularly important, since without Taiwan there is no understanding of Hou Hsiao-hsien; without Taiwan there would not be any Hou Hsiao-hsien to begin with, certainly not as we know him today. To show why this is the case, let us deal for a moment with each of these questions, beginning with the motivations behind such claims.

One thing to note right away is that the majority of these views belie underlying political motivations, albeit not all of the same ilk. In more than one of the above samples we must wonder whether the focus is even Chinese culture, let alone Taiwan. Perhaps Chinese culture, just like Hou's films, is merely means to other ends, namely to deconstruct the hegemony of Western cinema, particularly Hollywood. Note how often a grand opposition is set up between "East" versus "West": Hou now represents a courageous Eastern "Other" engaging in a brave defiance towards ubiquitous Western forms. This is well-worn track in Western scholarship on Asian cinema: starting with Japan, many attempts have been made to bring cultural issues to the forefront, the most notable example being Noel Burch's sometimes brilliant, but often misguided exploration of Japanese cinema, *To a Distant Observer*. The primary goal for Burch, something seen in his scholarship as a whole, is to pick apart the dominant modes of representation found in Western cinema. Japanese cinema in turn becomes one tool in this larger

struggle, but it is not an end in itself, nor is it even necessarily treated as an object worthy of study on its own. This approach also shares an affinity, if not origins, with assumptions made about Third Cinema: the notion of a conscious, even politicized, oppositional stance against colonialism and neo-colonialism, of the forceful and conscious preservation of indigenous traditions via cinematic means, and of the putative realization of an alternative cinematic language that is distinctively, and traditionally, local in origin.¹² All of these intellectual tendencies have been perpetuated more or less with writings on Hou; once again there is an almost predictable search for traces of an indigenous, "traditional" culture that is assumed to be clearly defined; once more this is but a radically "Other" cinema set against the predominance of the West.

Chinese scholars, on the other hand, may have different political motives which, intentionally or not, mesh very well with the official policy of the Chinese government. More often than not intellectuals in China discussing Hou promote ideas of "Greater China" and display often uncritical nationalist assumptions. Yeh Yueh-yu recalls a conversation in Beijing with a scholar who, on the surface at least, espouses the ideas of post-colonialism, and who has invited the likes of Frederic Jameson and Homi Bhabha to conferences there. Yet when asked what he thought about the issue of reunification of Taiwan with China, he politely expressed that this was necessary and inevitable, since this was not a theoretical question, but a political one.¹³ As this incident demonstrates, one should not equate any claims of "Chineseness" with a progressive form of resistance to the West, all pretensions aside. After all, in recent years the communist government in China has often justified its undemocratic policies by claiming that Confucianism and democracy are incompatible, conveniently ignoring evidence all around them suggesting otherwise, including Taiwan. Thus, when Ni Zhen announces that Hou's films express a Confucian "spirit," that statement is not as innocent as it seems, and in fact carries some troubling political overtones. Even more important, to simply chalk up Hou to traditional Chinese culture suits the nationalist project of the PRC quite well, bolstering the often belligerent claims made by the Chinese government on the island of Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province. Given how convenient it is for the rest of the world to simply take the Chinese claim on Taiwan at face value, few will call these scholars on their assertions.

Aside from these varied motivations for focusing primarily on Chinese culture are underlying assumptions which extend well beyond whether or not Hou fits an existing cultural model. Not only do these above mentioned commentators, both East and West, assume that Hou's films display a very "Chinese style," or a very "Chinese view of the world," they also implicitly assume that an essential, unified, synchronic idea of what it means to be very "Chinese" is possible, as if Chinese culture has been passed

down through the ages without having to suffer the ravages of history, as if Chinese philosophy and thought have remained essentially unified and easily definable, often under the grand rubric of “Confucianism.” Likewise, there is the assumption that the true Chinese artist values the past and tradition over more individualistic and creative paths in the present. If we ever hope to come to terms with Hou — most of all, to come to terms with how he relates to his own culture, including its traditional aspects — then each of these assumptions should be subjected to scrutiny.

Even the most cursory review of Chinese history suggests a more dynamic and less easily definable Chinese culture than many will admit. If one were to periodize this culture — for instance, pre-Han versus post-Han, before and after Buddhism’s arrival, or before and after 1919 — one discovers varying, even contradictory, traditions to choose from. Or suppose other plausible divisions are made, such as dividing China into Northern and Southern cultures, or high versus popular cultures, “amateurs” versus “professionals.” These historical, geographical, and social divisions are all real and long recognized by the Chinese themselves. But they are all ignored, sometimes conveniently, when defining Hou as an essentially “Chinese” director.

Consider as well that Confucianism has adapted itself many times over. Before the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), when Confucianism became the ideology of the state, it was but one component in a *mélange*, contesting with the Daoists, the Naturalists (philosophers of *yin* and *yang*), the Legalists, the Logicians, the Mohists, the Diplomats, the Agriculturists, and one group so loose in their thinking that they are simply called the Eclectics (*za jia*).¹⁴ Thereafter Confucianism was forced to reinvent itself to retain its ideological supremacy. In fact, during the long period between the Han and Sui dynasties (AD 220–589), Confucianism was so beleaguered that it had to contend with both a strong Daoist revival and the influx of Buddhism.¹⁵ During the Tang dynasty (618–907), considered the most cosmopolitan era in Chinese history — indeed for most Chinese the pinnacle of Chinese civilization — Confucianism still had to work side by side with Buddhism, since rituals from the latter religion were now practiced even in the court.¹⁶ Only with neo-Confucianism, which was consolidated later under the Song (976–1276), was Confucianism to reign supreme again, a state of affairs that lasted up until the encroachment of the West centuries later. In short, it would take Confucianism several centuries to be as dominant as it once had been under the Han. Moreover, it did so only by deftly co-opting many metaphysical ideas from both Buddhism and Daoism.¹⁷ To put it another way, Confucianism allowed itself to be impure, contradictory and thus historically useful in different ways during different eras.

China’s art was no less dynamic historically as were its ideological and religious ideas. In traditional China, the artist was not a special category;

rather the famous artists/writers were usually part of the educated, bureaucratic elite with a vested interest in the Confucian system, at least when times were good. However, when one looks at what has been preserved, even praised, in this putatively monolithic tradition, one finds ample evidence of other traditions also at work.¹⁸ No non-Confucian philosophy has had greater influence on Chinese poets, painters and calligraphers than Daoism, even though this is an anarchist philosophy which in its original form directly opposed Confucianism's hierarchal ideals. Some of the most revered artistic figures in Chinese history were heavily imbued with Daoist ideas. Wang Xizhi (303–361) is considered the greatest practitioner of perhaps the highest art form in China, calligraphy, and yet his works represented not only “the aristocratic ideals of spontaneity and relaxed nonchalance” in vogue at the time, but also carried with them deeper Daoist underpinnings.¹⁹ The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove were a group of highly accomplished poets now described as the epitome of the “individualistic and idiosyncratic artist”²⁰ who had little regard for Confucianism. Equally idiosyncratic was the notorious Ruan Ji (210–263) who shocked everyone by crying at the death of an unknown little girl, yet daring to feast on the day of his mother's funeral without shedding a tear — yet another affront to Confucian morality.²¹ Guo Xi (after 1000–c. 1090), the immensely influential landscape painter, depicted a vision of a Daoist paradise in his most famous work, *Early Spring*.²² Landscapes in general, preeminent in the history of Chinese painting, often depict hermits who have retreated from society and are dwarfed by nature, ideas clearly of Daoist import, even if a Confucian interpretation would be applied to them later on by Confucian scholars.

The diversity of the Chinese artistic tradition can be seen in the High Tang, most of all in the poets Li Bai (also known as Li Bo, 701–762) and Du Fu (712–770), two poets who hold the same stature in China as Mozart and Beethoven hold in the West. Yet the two poets are quite different.²³ Du Fu became one of those models whom later generations would try to follow in poetry, but he himself was a Confucian original. Li Bai, on the other hand, was a Daoist bad boy, a failed, drunken bureaucrat whose poetry Li Zehou describes as “an unpredictable outpouring of emotion in inimitable tones.”²⁴

Even the critical values expressed in the past imply a dynamic rather than static cultural development. For all of their Confucian certitudes, it is surprising how often traditional writings on art and literature extolled the virtues of originality, not the imitation of tradition. One example is the Qing dynasty scholar, Ye Xie (1627–1703):

Poetry is a “final” art: it must say what no one before has ever said and bring out what no one before has ever thought out. Only then can it be “my” poem. If a person thinks it is real mastery to ape the expressions and gait of others and call this “rules,” then not only will poetry be destroyed, [a legitimate concept of] rules will also be destroyed. If I have made rules

into something posterior, it does not mean that I have abandoned rules; rather this is the way to preserve rules.²⁵

This was hardly a late development in Chinese history. Centuries earlier Xie Ho (active c. 500–535?), one of the most important writers on Chinese painting, says this about a painter named Chang Tse: “His ideas and thoughts ran riot, and he had to but move his brush to be original. His mind was his guide, and his views were his own; he was sparing in his adaptations from others. His versatile ingenuity was inexhaustible.”²⁶ Su Shi (1037–1101) was one of the greatest painters in the so-called scholar tradition of China, and his advice was simple: “There is one basic rule in poetry and painting; natural genius and originality.”²⁷ The concrete results of such theoretical dexterity over the ages are a range of Chinese painting so varied that one of the most noted scholars of Chinese art, Craig Clunas, argues convincingly against any unified notion of “Chinese Painting.”²⁸

The point of this brief historical digression of Chinese thought and art is simple: to merely say that Hou’s films are very Chinese does not say very much at all. Of the hundreds and thousands shades and facets this culture has shown over the centuries, which of these specifically apply in the case of Hou? Moreover, this question becomes aggravated by the violent and often cruel twists of Chinese history in the twentieth century. For this is not only a question of history — of time — but also of place. To wit, not only can we not escape history, we cannot escape Taiwan, since that is precisely where Hou grew up, and where he still holds his base of filmmaking operations. If Chinese culture is going to have any meaning in the case of Hou’s cinema, it lies in how Chinese culture has played out in Taiwan from roughly 1947 (and earlier, as we shall see) to the present day. And what Chinese culture means in Taiwan is radically different than what it means in mainland China, or even Hong Kong, for that matter, so much so that Hou’s films are inconceivable without the island.

This certainly explains why the critical and academic discourse is so different in Taiwan. Westerners have encountered Taiwanese views on Hou mostly through either the writings in English by Peggy Chiao, or through translated interviews with Hou and his screenwriter, Chu Tien-wen. Hou, Chu, and Chiao are of recent mainland descent, born of parents who came over to Taiwan in the mass exodus of 1949. At the same time, however, all three grew up in Taiwan, a fact which makes them quite ambivalent about China no matter what cultural affinities the three may feel towards their looming neighbor. Chiao has on occasion used traditional Chinese culture to explain Hou.²⁹ Yet Chiao is in an unusual position in Taiwan, often burdened with the promotion of Taiwanese art films abroad due to her language skills and her unofficial position as the doyen of Taiwanese cinema. From a sheer marketing standpoint, it makes more sense for her to dangle such easily digestible cultural morsels than to equivocate. Moreover, if Chiao really does

believe in the “Chineseness” of Hou’s style, this is only a *partial* explanation at best. She also believes that Hou is a modern director, and she intelligently refuses any reductive explanations for him.³⁰ Chu Tien-wen seems to deflect the issue even more, declaring that defining Hou’s style as Chinese is rather difficult given the complexity and contradictions of Chinese culture itself.³¹ Hou also displays dexterity when discussing this matter. In the 1997 documentary about him, Hou himself was asked by Olivier Assayas whether he is a Chinese director or a Taiwanese director, and Hou replied that, while one cannot deny the cultural aspect of being Chinese, one also cannot deny that he is a Taiwanese director, not Chinese.³² On another occasion he explained that his goal was to create an indirect style that would belong to “the East” without specifying China, Japan, or even Taiwan.³³ On the surface Hou seems to be reverting to some reverse Orientalism like those quoted above: yet in avoiding any singular, or specific cultural label, Hou was making a very calculated and intentionally equivocal statement on his part, one that is quite typical of the Taiwanese in general. Even more significant, for most scholars and commentators within Taiwan, how Chinese Hou is becomes a secondary issue, compared to more immediate and often historically specific issues regarding Taiwan, as we shall see. What is of essence for many Western and mainland Chinese commentators, is of lesser importance for Hou and company, and in most of the indigenous literature on him.

To be sure, some academic writers outside of Taiwan have already begun to take on other avenues of explanation. One key figure in this regards is Yeh Yueh-yu, a scholar of Taiwanese origin who has also published much in English on Hou, serving as an important counter-weight to any facile conclusions made about him. In English, the first in-depth source on Hou is a website devoted to *City of Sadness* which Yeh co-authored with Abe Mark Nornes.³⁴ Crucial here is how deeply they try to deal with both text and context, a project long overdue for Hou. When analyzing Hou’s style, they implode stereotypes that Hou, like any Asian filmmaker, supposedly draws from an amorphous “great legacy of Oriental Culture.” This focus on Taiwanese specifics is more fully developed in a recent, breakthrough book which Yeh co-authored with Darrell Davis, *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island*. In the chapter on Hou, for example, they note how Hou’s shift in his early career from a commercial director to a festival director reflects a larger shift in Taiwanese culture away from links with China.³⁵ Others have also taken more nuanced views. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar have noted how radically different Hou’s historical sense is in *City of Sadness*, a subaltern “historiology” at odds with state-sanctioned historiography found in most historical films under the direct guidance of both the KMT and the CCP. Yet they do not simply trace this difference in some cultural return that predates the modern nation-state, but rather alternative “relations of modernity and the nation-state.”³⁶ Meanwhile, David Bordwell, in his recent *Figures*

Traced in Light, has situated Hou's rarefied long-take style in a larger tradition of filmmaking based on *mise-en-scène* and staging.³⁷ Bordwell does for Hou what he earlier has done for the Japanese director, Ozu, noting how blanket cultural explanations are often too facile since they fail to explain the complexity of the phenomenon before us. Once again, what is at issue is not culture in general, but the specific accomplishments of Hou and how to account for them in specific ways. Chinese culture, most of all traditional culture, is found to be wanting in its explanatory power. As it turns out, this story — this problem — is far more interesting than that.

The purpose of this monograph is to provide not only an overview of Hou's career to the present day, but also to try to explain the myriad reasons why it turned out the way it has. It does assume some agency on the part of Hou — a view that is not always accepted in film and cultural studies. However, it also recognizes that this is a highly circumscribed agency, that the range of choices Hou faced has always been limited by the particulars of every historical moment, shaped by the ideological, industrial, and institutional constraints in which he has always operated under. This study does not just explore how Hou defied the system, or overcame his circumstances in the traditional auteurist sense, but more importantly how he took advantage of the peculiar opportunities these circumstances provided him. This study does not deny the impact of Chinese culture, but it does attempt to contextualize and historicize that culture within modern-day Taiwan. It does not deny even that this culture is very different from the West in numerous ways, but it also acknowledges that "different" does not mean "Other," that like any human culture, Chinese culture, including its Taiwanese version, grapples with the same fundamental issues of life, death, family, society — in other words, like any successful culture it is a malleable means of collective survival. Since Taiwan is so central here, this work relies primarily on Taiwanese sources in Chinese for the reason that the domestic discourse on Hou and Taiwanese cinema is little understood outside of Taiwan. Most importantly, however, this study attempts to show how indispensable Taiwan is in the career of Hou.

The organization here is straightforward and chronological: each chapter represents a distinctive stage in Hou's career, sometimes even representing radical and unexpected breaks. Chapter 1 is entitled "Hou and the Taiwanese Experience" and it sets out to explain why this catch-all phrase is central to understanding Hou and his films. While discussing Hou up to 1982, when he directed his third commercial feature before joining the Taiwanese New Cinema, this chapter also explores competing historical "claims" made on Taiwan (including China's) going back centuries, followed by an overview of overall development of Taiwan after 1949 when the island became the last and permanent base of the KMT. (The era of Japanese colonial rule and the immediate post-war era are both more fully explained in Chapter 3.) With

this larger context in mind, this chapter will explore how Taiwanese cinema became entangled in all of these larger political, economic, and cultural developments. All of this will provide a revealing background to Hou's own very selective thematic choices once he joins the New Cinema, as well as his aesthetic ones.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the dramatic changes that occurred in Taiwan during the 1980s, and how the rise of the Taiwanese New Cinema was not a coincidence, nor was Hou's personal rise to the top of that same movement. It covers everything from Hou's growing entourage who offered him invaluable assistance (including his scriptwriter, Chu Tien-wen, who introduced him to the writings of Shen Congwen) to his own assistance to others, to his negotiation through the political and economic minefield of a local film industry always in crisis, to finally his overcoming that constricting environment through his unexpected mastery of the international festival realm. The chapter at the same time provides an overview of his New Cinema films starting with *The Sandwich Man* (1983) and ending with the flawed *Daughter of the Nile* (1987), which came out immediately after the movement was seen to have officially ended, but which nevertheless also prepared Hou for his next two groundbreaking films.

The third chapter in a sense covers a "peak" in Hou's career, since the primary focus is his next two films *City of Sadness* (1989) and *The Puppetmaster* (1993), arguably Hou's greatest masterpieces. First, however, some key historical background is given, since these two films deal with the two most critical eras of Taiwan's history which together created the present-day Taiwan conundrum: the era of Japanese colonial rule (1895 to 1945) and the immediate "return" of Taiwan to China culminating in the bloody 228 Incident of 1947, the darkest stain of the KMT's checkered rule over the island. It will analyze how *City of Sadness*, which deals with that infamous incident, became the cultural event in Taiwan's history which extended well beyond its winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Particular attention is paid as to how much the film itself was responsible for the film's lasting cultural impact. This chapter then explicates how by comparison relatively little attention was paid to Hou's next film, *The Puppetmaster*, and yet argue that this work may have surpassed its predecessor both in terms of its aesthetics and its historical sense. The chapter concludes with the question as to whether these two historical masterworks represent a type of history unlike any other, cinematic or otherwise.

Chapter 4 covers a crucial period in Hou's career where his films change dramatically in several ways. It begins with how and why *Good Men, Good Women* represents a radical break in Hou's career, and how his next film, *Goodbye South, Goodbye* confirmed this break. Yet the bulk of the attention is placed on his 1998 masterpiece, *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), a work of visual density and complexity rivaling Mizoguchi. Moreover, since this film is the

first work of Hou's that is not set in Taiwan, and since it takes place in late nineteenth-century Shanghai, the whole issue of China, and how Hou's films deal with this, comes to the fore. More to the point, the question now becomes as to whether even Hou's own cinematic style is somehow very "Chinese," just as many have suggested, something this analysis casts doubt upon.

Chapter 5 begins with a brief overview of Hou's career from *Millennium Mambo* (2001) to *The Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), and how these have only exacerbated the unpredictable twists and turns of his career since 1995. Yet this chapter will also try to place Hou's career in a larger, global context. In the end the argument is that Hou, as unpredictable as he has become, still deserves a place in film history as one of the world's great cinematic masters, largely because he had the good fortune of living in Taiwan at a particular time in history, and because he has created a new cinematic tradition in Asia which now has several practitioners throughout the region.

The conclusion for this revised edition focuses primarily on Hou's notable return to the international scene in 2015 with *The Assassin*, a work that earned Hou the prize for Best Director at Cannes. *The Assassin* represents Hou's foray into the *wuxia* genre that has become seemingly obligatory for most Chinese-language auteurs in recent years. Yet Hou's peculiar take literally turns the *wuxia* genre on its head. This most recent film seemingly raises more questions about Hou himself. Yet it confirms three lessons found in the previous edition of this study: an auteur of Hou's global stature requires historical luck, sufficient institutional support, and an enabling entourage. As unexpected as Hou's latest work is in many ways, there is nothing in it that invalidates what has been said in the five chapters of this book.

One final word needs to be said here on the question of uniqueness. While the pages that follow will argue that Hou's films are unique because the circumstances he found himself in are unique, the same could be argued for any director who has distinguished him or herself. Perhaps the underlying lesson here is that the local matters for any director, no matter how globally successful they are in the end. Every director has to begin somewhere; no director from the start knocks on the doors of a festival and says he or she wants in without some sort of resume. In the case of Hou, some seem puzzled that he is from Taiwan, but this study aims to solve that particular puzzle, to explore thoroughly how the tortuous path of Hou's career only seems strange until one looks carefully at Taiwan itself over the last three decades, most of all the convoluted, interlocking paths taken by both Taiwanese cinema and Taiwanese society as a whole. Instead of an inexplicable puzzle, the story becomes a timely symbiotic dance of various historical moments, a story replete with specific geopolitical and economic factors, many of them purely domestic. This is in the end a very Taiwanese story, one that should be taken more seriously than it has been.

5

Hou in the New Millennium

If anything, the story of Hou Hsiao-hsien serves as a cautionary tale. Often conclusions and generalizations are just too easy to come by; just as often they overlook the more tangled mesh of historical reality of which we can achieve a fragmentary understanding at best. Perhaps the most viable conclusion is to not conclude, but to let things remain open-ended. Not that no generalizations can be made. Even the most vociferous detractor and the most fervent admirer might agree that the films of Hou do represent an exceptionally unique body of work, even if not to everyone's taste. The problem is how to account for this uniqueness beyond the usual auteurist traps, how to properly contextualize all this. To parse the vicissitudes of culture outside the whims of history is a mistake — for there is no culture outside of the vagaries of history. Moreover, if cultures are ultimately collective means of survival and adaptation, this implies that the most successful cultures are not those rigidly defined for time immemorial; rather it is those which are the most contradictory and the most difficult to define. Indigenous intellectuals are often obsessed with the iterations or deconstructions of grand oppositions such as “East versus West,” “tradition versus modernization.” But the average denizen in Asia today does not seem to worry much about such stark, binary terms. Hou is one example of this phenomenon: although beloved by intellectuals the world over, he himself is not really an intellectual; although his audience is not chiefly those he represents, he is more in tune with their artful daily Taiwanese practices of surviving in a world without clear definition and certitude. He quietly and indirectly proffers this ongoing experience through nearly every frame and scene. Yet too often we still do not look or listen carefully enough.

If there is anything else to be learned from Hou's story, it is that culture and history combined, while necessary, are still not sufficient. Neither are unified; both undergo subtle local variations. Sometimes the regional differences are pronounced, such as is the case in Taiwan versus the rest of China. We have explored how central the very notion of experience is in the case of Hou, yet that is largely because he grew up and learned his craft in Taiwan. Perhaps one safe conclusion to be made, one implied throughout this study,

is that Hou owes just about everything to Taiwan and the “Taiwanese Experience.” Consider where Hou could have ended up. Being born in southern China, and moving to Taiwan when not even two years old, Hou’s story is but one small footnote of the Chinese Diaspora, a phenomenon which has profoundly affected large sectors of the globe. One cannot see quite the same opportunities for Hou had his family moved instead to the Chinese communities of Malaysia, Indonesia or even Singapore. Not only would the thematic issues in such situations be radically different for Hou, there would not have been the same level of institutional support to nurture a career such as this.

Of course, Hou’s father could have remained in mainland China. What would the chances of Hou’s career being the same had he grown up there? First, assuming that he survived such crises such as the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution, Hou would have still missed out on the wealth of experience he accrued in the 1970s in the Taiwanese film industry. To be sure this was a very constrictive commercial environment in Taiwan, with added political constraints, but it was also an industry that more often than not made over a hundred films per annum. Many of the traits of Hou’s now widely revered aesthetic, most of all the use of loose outline scripting, improvisation, daring lighting schemes — and of course the long take — have their humble origins in his trying to overcome the practical limitations these conditions entailed. One could certainly imagine Hou as being of the same tenor of many of the Fifth Generation in the 1980s in China — after all, Ah Cheng’s novel became Chen Kaige’s *The King of Children* (1987). But since Chinese film production came to a virtual standstill for such a long time under Mao, Hou would have faced a different set of problems to overcome, most of all the question of which models to follow after the long interregnum. He would have had to start almost from scratch much like everyone else did in the late 1970s. Since he would have to come out of something like the Beijing Film Academy, his education would have been more formal, more abstract. Hou certainly would have heard of the “master shot” by the time he had directed his first feature film. On the other hand, he would not have already been the assistant director for well over a dozen films by that point; in other words, he would have lacked the crucial, and entirely home-grown daily grind, that hands-on experience upon which he was able eventually to forge his own path.

Admittedly there was one other place where Hou could have gotten just as much day-to-day filmmaking experience, if not more so, virtually situated in the backyard of his birthplace: Hong Kong. Once again, however, not only would the thematic concerns have been different, so would the aesthetic parameters Hou would have encountered. Unlike in Taiwan, Hong Kong’s film industry was not on the verge of a commercial crisis in the early 1980s. It was the opposite, which only added to the woes of Taiwanese cinema.

Hou could have learned his craft on Hong Kong sets, not in the classroom, just as he did in Taiwan. But within a healthy film industry Hou would not likely have been able to experiment with long takes and distancing the way he did. It appears that, no matter what culture or continent, whenever an industry is in crisis directors tend to gain more ascendancy since producers are more willing to try anything until some “formula” works. (Even Hollywood underwent such a period in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, until the blockbuster formula became well established.) Of course, many will bring up one counter-example: Wong Kar-wai. Yet it has been argued that even Wong Kar-wai, as innovative as he became, is just as much a product of the commercial milieu in Hong Kong as a rebel against it.¹ Hong Kong could have made room for a Hou of certain distinction, but likely a very different Hou than we know today.

Still, “experience” has been the operative term in this study in just about every sense of the term, including the experience of living in a particular place at a particular time. In this sense of the term, no place provided experiences quite like post-war Taiwan. As Chu Tien-wen described in chapter 1, the Taiwanese Experience was especially acute for the children of recently arrived mainland parents. The Taiwan they experienced firsthand was diametrically at odds with both the China their parents spoke of and the official propaganda spewed forth by the KMT government, that the island became almost forbidden fruit right before their eyes, a source of endless fascination which eventually filled volumes of fiction and endless reels of film. Hou became especially immersed in that world due to a number of additional factors: coming from a family both *waishengren* and Hakka, living in the south surrounded by *benshengren* speaking a strange dialect, Hou from an early age mastered that dialect so well that many in Taiwan mistakenly have identified him as a *benshengren*. Hou’s mastery of Taiwanese is no small matter. First off, this was done simply as a means for survival, arguably the most consistent theme of his films. More importantly, language becomes his first major thematic breakthrough in the New Cinema. The exclusive use of Taiwanese in his chapter of *The Sandwich Man*, done four years before the lifting of martial law, was proof enough that Taiwan — as it is, not how it somehow “should” be — was now the centerpiece. Hou’s and other New Cinema films thereafter all confirmed this remarkable cultural shift.

Of course, Hou was not alone. The importance of the New Cinema also lies in a remarkable coalescence of talent which aided and abetted Hou’s career, and eventually got him on a more permanent path of festival cinema. At the top is Chu Tien-wen, who deepened Hou’s work to no end, starting with her introduction of Shen Congwen. Yet there is also the long-term impact of the likes of Du Duzhi and Mark Lee, arguably the best sound man and best cinematographer in Asia respectively. With talent like this at his side, there is little wonder why these films are often so exquisitely shot

coupled with richly layered sound designs. Such quality became imperative for filmmakers from Taiwan, who otherwise would not have garnered so much attention abroad.

Still, cinema is too above the radar for such trends to occur without some official sanction. For decades the government stridently attempted to squelch any sense of Taiwan being unique or distinct. Conceivably the KMT could have kept this fiction going even longer — had the ROC somehow kept its UN seat, had the US not withdrawn recognition, had incidents like the Jiangnan Incident of 1984 not occurred, or if martial law had been extended even a few more years. Equally important is the government which in the long run undercut its own film industry in favor of Hong Kong. Change any of these contingencies, and Hou himself might have missed out on his chance to become the leader of a movement which indirectly communicated to the world that there is a place such as Taiwan, a place not to be confused or conflated with its ancestral homeland across the straits. Hou was just the right age at the right time.

Nevertheless, Hou and company had to contend not only with the government, but also with the world at large. These films did not announce their underlying messages, taking every step imaginable to not appear as propaganda with their oblique and unvarnished portrayals of Taiwanese reality. Given the precarious status Taiwan still finds itself in to this day, where the official line for most is that this is still Chinese soil, this was a task particularly suited for one of Hou's temperament, not someone more direct and "critical." This becomes even more apparent after the lifting of martial law in 1987, which allowed an unearthing of historical taboos that even many Taiwanese were only dimly aware of. That Hou handled the Japanese Era, the 228 Incident and the White Terror so delicately, and so carefully, indicates not so much concerns about how the KMT might react, but how everyone might react.

There is one other aspect of Hou's career which belies his Taiwanese roots: his ability to reinvent himself more than once. Hou has changed in startling ways over his career — a comparison of his commercial trilogy with his later historical works is astounding enough. Even comparing *City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster* with *Good Men, Good Women* and *Flowers of Shanghai* shows how unpredictable he can be. Hou has an uncanny ability to change in ways that shocks even those who think they know him best — except there is nothing uncanny about it. Asia in general has shown a remarkable ability to change in the last few decades in ways without comparison in the history of the West. Taiwan is almost the Asian avant garde of change, not due to any special collective talent, but to the especial historical conditions we have discussed in the previous chapters. Considering all of the regime changes, the traumatic and abrupt overnight shifts in power, the forced ambivalence which continues to this day, Taiwan should be properly

recognized and commended for its continued ability to adapt and survive in what should have been impossible conditions. This was true in the 1970s and 1980s. This is still true even in the new millennium.

Within Taiwan, Hou of the new millennium is an extra-cinematic media figure, not a director everyone still talks about. This directly ties in with all the twists and complications to be found in Taiwan during the last decade. In the year 2000, there was a monumental regime change with the election of the DPP candidate, Chen Shui-bian, as president of the ROC. This officially ended over five decades of KMT rule, and was widely welcomed across the island. Before long, however, many soured on the new government, finding it incapable of breaking the impasse with mainland China, and arguably more likely to provoke the PRC. Many felt that the new government was blocking closer economic ties across the straits, something many Taiwanese supported. Moreover, many have found the DPP administration no less susceptible to the egregious corruption so commonplace among the old guard of the Nationalists. Chen was re-elected in 2004 by a razor-thin margin, which was abetted by an assassination attempt on his life which many feel was staged. Not long after, President Chen's approval ratings plummeted to levels which would have made President Bush in his second term seem all the political rage. Some have polled this rating at less than 10%, while even the DPP admitted that it is at most only at 33%.² The first clear evidence of a dramatic shift among the electorate was elections at the local level in 2005, where the DPP fared badly. This was a bad omen for the party, since ironically these were the same sort of elections that initiated the rise of the DPP in 1989, not long after the release of *City of Sadness*.

The elections in early 2008 only confirmed how badly most Taiwanese viewed the DPP, including the majority of *benshengren*. By a 58%-to-41% margin, the KMT candidate, Ma Ying-jeou, returned the old Nationalists to their former role as the ruling party. This was bolstered even more by a roughly three-quarter majority in the legislative yuan. Outsiders not familiar with Taiwan might find this result shocking, given the KMT's checkered and sometimes brutal past. But this is not the KMT of old. Starting in the 1970s, the composition of the party changed dramatically when it opened its doors to the *benshengren* majority. And nobody further pushed the cause of Taiwanese Independence than Lee Teng-hui, the Taiwanese-born president — and head of the KMT — from 1988–2000. When Ma Ying-jeou was mayor of Taipei, he openly sanctioned “Comrade Day” in the capital city, an odd phrase to the uninitiated, yet even odder when you realize that “comrade” is the local slang for gays. (So much for the Confucian patriarchal certitudes the old KMT had once enforced, even through films directed by the likes of Li Xing.) In today's Taiwan, such an “outlandish” action is a non-issue. What does matter to everyone is still Taiwan's future vis-à-vis mainland China. The KMT in 2008 made a convincing case that they can deal with the mainland

Chinese in a less provocative manner and with greater diplomatic flexibility. Moreover, they advocate more direct economic ties with China. The crux of the matter is simple and still unchanged: given present conditions, and the hostility the mainland government displayed towards Chen's eight-year reign, and given how Chen's administration could seemingly do nothing to lessen tensions, nor even rule cleanly in Taiwan itself, the KMT seems to offer the best chance of maintaining the current status quo of neither reunification nor independence, coupled with increasing economic integration with China.

This context explains Hou's own public persona over these same eight years. Hou is very typical of most Taiwanese, whether *benshengren* or *waishengren*: he shows no party loyalty, forming one small part of a vast middle of independent voters which would be a nightmare for American political strategists. However, Hou has recently dabbled in political activism for the first time since supporting a short-lived political party in the early 1990s. Before the 2004 presidential election, Hou became the main spokesperson for a new group called "The Alliance for Ethnic Equality."³ What concerned Hou and others most of all were ethnic tensions between the *waishengren* and the *benshengren* now being exploited by politicians for immediate political gain during the 2004 election.⁴ In doing so, Hou has not simply become a member of the "Blue" camp, led by the KMT; nor was he thereby opposing the "Green" camp, led by the DPP. Hou declares that he is "100% non-Blue, non-Green," reminding people that in the past he had opposed the KMT. What he fears presently, however, is a new "disheartening threat" from very different quarters.⁵ This notwithstanding, members of the Green camp soon accused Hou of taking "a false middle stance" since he in the past had supposedly stood with the former GIO head, James Soong, an independent "Blue" candidate in the 2000 election, and even for supposedly receiving funds from the mainland government to make films — two charges which proved to be unfounded.⁶ Interestingly, Hou's main line of defense to these charges were his own past films: to demonstrate where he truly stands, Hou offered copies of *City of Sadness*, *A Time to Live*, *A Time to Die* and other films to the spokesperson for the president, Wu Nairen, who had leveled such charges at him.⁷

Hou's more recent films, however, do not possess such domestic cachet as Hou the public figure. This is a marked change from the past. Up to *City of Sadness*, Hou's films were often the topic of local discussion, often in relation to the fate of the Taiwanese film industry and Taiwan itself. *City of Sadness*, of course, became the center of a major political controversy (also related to the key election that same year). Hou's most recent films, by contrast, are hardly as controversial as Hou himself, for the reason that the demise of the Taiwanese film industry has become a historical fact rather than a crisis to be ameliorated. The DDP-led government's film policy simply continued

that of the old, mainly in the form of ineffectual subsidies. One incident illustrates how the “new” Taiwanese government believed everything could be solved by money alone, and much less than what is actually required. Upon the international success of Zhang Yimou’s *Hero* in 2003, the prime minister in Taiwan met with Ang Lee and asked him to make the Taiwanese equivalent to *Hero*: a biopic about the Ming general, Koxinga, who is considered the father of Taiwan. He offered Lee an unprecedented sum of NT\$100 million, or a little over US\$3 million. Ang Lee answered that to produce something similar to *Hero* would require four times that amount, or well over US\$10 million. The prime minister was aghast: such a proposed budget would have exceeded all the money put into the Assistance and Guidance grant system over the last decade and a half.⁸ Needless to say, the project never got off the ground.

This incident exposes how little any administration has understood the actual economies of scale involved in filmmaking, or about the amount of institutional support that is necessary. Meanwhile, Taiwan is now arguably the most Hollywood-dominated market in all of Asia, albeit for multiple reasons which cannot be blamed on the government alone.⁹ Still, some note the recent success of South Korea in protecting its domestic market while creating a system of large-scale investment and market savvy that has appealed to audiences throughout Asia. The government in Taiwan, however, perpetuates a calculated, do-nothing policy based on Taiwan’s peculiar geopolitical situation. In 2001, Taiwan was officially admitted to the WTO, a major diplomatic coup for a country with such dubious international status. Most WTO members still claim a “cultural exception” for cinema to some extent, France most of all. However, the Taiwanese film industry apparently was a sacrificial lamb in order to curry the favor of the Americans during the negotiations. In order to honor these tacit agreements, the new Taiwanese government soon lifted all restrictions on the number of prints per film in Taiwan.¹⁰ This only further aided Hollywood and its multiplexes, something that became evident when an unprecedented number of prints for *Lord of the Rings* entered Taiwan, underselling every local theater with prices the latter could not compete with.¹¹ By 2004, Hollywood distributors were pulling in close to 90% of the total box office in Taiwan.¹² Meanwhile, building on the success of the state-of-the-art Warner Village which opened in eastern Taipei in 1998 (at the time the single largest movie complex in all of Asia), today there are Warner Villages all over the island, dominating exhibition in each locale.

Hou clearly does not make his own films to suit the commercial dictates of the Warner Villages now peppered across his home island. Nevertheless, he has on occasion stated that he does not make films for film festivals either.¹³ The timing suggests otherwise. Since 1998, Hou has released four films at roughly two-year intervals, and always getting a completed version

done by May, just in time for Cannes. Cannes has always escaped Hou's grasp, whether the prize for best director or the Palme d'Or. (Hou did receive a Special Jury Prize in 1993 for *The Puppetmaster*, largely due to the singular efforts of Abbas Kiarostami.) In addition, Hou has a new company, Sinomovie, which in part is designed to give young people a chance at making their own work. Meanwhile he was the driving force in a new art theater opened in the former residence of the American ambassador in Taipei. But one theater and a couple of small production/distribution companies do not an industry make, continued evidence of how much cinema remains a cottage industry in Taiwan today. Even Taiwan's most celebrated director is little seen in his own market.

But what of his most recent films? If anything, Chu Tien-wen's prediction of "twist and turns" has only intensified. Two of the four films, *Café Lumiere* (2003) and *Le Ballon Rouge* (2007), do not take place in Taiwan, but in two of Hou's most favorable markets: Japan and France respectively. Only two of the four, *Millennium Mambo* (2001) and *Three Times* (2005), were accepted into the competition at Cannes, which is no small feat, but still not the top prize Hou seems to pursue. Only one of the four, *Three Times*, delves into historical material. Hou's films are still highly elliptical, and rather challenging even for the seasoned viewer of art cinema, but they do not seem to break as much strikingly new ground. We should analyze each of these works briefly.

Millennium Mambo (2001)

Hou and Chu Tien-wen have claimed that *Millennium Mambo* somewhat resembles a modern-day version of *Flowers of Shanghai* since both films depict people unable to escape a space they are not fully aware of.¹⁴ At the same time, however, Hou also says that the title itself symbolizes a "new rhythm and new developments" within Taiwan in the new millennium.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Mark Lee describes it as "a song in praise of youth done primarily in a documentary style."¹⁶ These rather vague statements are difficult to reconcile with each other. Hou himself cannot quite fully explain what his purpose for making this film was, even admitting in a television interview that he was often wracked with doubts about shooting this sort of material, that maybe only young people can really make films about young people, since they are not yet too self-aware.¹⁷

Yet Hou himself does not seem entirely self-aware in this case. Clearly he has become deeply enmeshed with these young people, and this film in particular has a close connection to the opening of the new Sinomovie foundation and website (www.sinomovie.com) in 2001, which is designed for the so-called "E Generation." The original plan was to quickly shoot this film and five additional ones, all in digital, which would then be left on the website for anyone to edit as they see fit. However, Hou opted to not

shoot it in digital on the advice of Mark Lee who argued that the transfer of digital to film stock in the end would be too expensive.¹⁸ Then there is how Hou compiled his material. Two years before the film came out he began to join Jack Kao and Lim Giong in the actual night life seen in the film. In these settings Kao really did come off as a noble older brother who would guide these seemingly aimless youth,¹⁹ much like Kao's character in the film. Hou claims he kept his distance, simply observing this supposedly alien world, listening to the life stories of young people as they struck up conversations with him.²⁰ On the other hand, he also admits to trying Ecstasy in order to understand what they were experiencing,²¹ casting doubt on how much requisite "distance" Hou actually achieved. Chu Tien-wen admits as much in the interview with Michael Berry, conducted shortly before the premiere at Cannes: "Hou Hsiao-hsien has always had an easier time filming subject matter in which there is a historical distance. But when it comes to contemporary Taiwan, he is too close and has trouble finding the right perspective to capture his story."²²

In this case, his perspective, along with his purpose, appears muddled. Even the attempt at a faux history, having the voice-over of a "future" Vicky in 2011 speak of her "past" in 2001, referring to herself in the third person, fails to ameliorate this seeming lack of distance. Certain stylistic changes reflect this. This film affirms the continued commitment to the mobile long take evident since *Good Men, Good Women*. At just over 97 seconds per shot, more than 80% have overt camera movements. However, these are more random and haphazard than its immediate predecessor; none of these movements rival the slow arcing game of revealing a larger world such as seen in *Flowers of Shanghai*. Many noted the use of close-ups in this film, yet these are often only brief moments of longer takes. The more consistent new trait is an abnormally shallow depth of field, to the point where out-of-focus foreground elements resemble the visual gimmicks of the Qiong Yao films in the 1970s. Most striking is a scene of Vicky and Hao-hao making love about eighteen minutes into the film, where much of their faces and bodies are obscured by surreal colors and flashing lights (figure 33). This trait seems almost a tacit admission that Hou, along with his camera, are so close as if lost in this world.

Perhaps the greatest difference between this film and Hou's previous ones, including *Flowers of Shanghai*, is that in this case these are not people trying to survive the twists of fate they have no control over; instead it is merely lifestyle choices. Hou has for most of his career avoided even a hint of villainy in his characters. Now he has Hao-hao, a stalking, violent, abusive boyfriend who intentionally disrupted Vicky's education so they would stay together, who refuses to work, who steals and pawns his father's Rolex, and generally does nothing even slightly redeeming in any scenes in which he appears. Vicky, played by Shu Qi, does not garner much sympathy



Figure 33

Millennium Mambo (2001): the return of Qiong Yao gimmicks?

either: she is clearly unhappy being with Hao-hao, yet inexplicably is “hypnotized” by him as if “under a spell,” for some reason staying in the relationship until she spends NT\$500,000 of her own money. (To her credit, she does eventually leave Hao-hao for someone who genuinely cares for her, yet one wonders what took her so long.) *Millennium Mambo* also repeats the tendency seen in *Good Men, Good Women*: to create stark contrasts which are almost didactic, in this case generational and cultural in nature. The older Kao seemingly is the only one with any sense of direction despite his membership in the underworld, as if he were a stand-in for Hou’s self-appointed role. Meanwhile, Taipei is starkly contrasted to the pristine, snow-swept landscapes of Hokkaido, Japan. Even the apartment in Taipei is like the nightclubs: its lighting is surreal, enhanced by an overly warm glow clashing with the intentionally blue color temperature seen through the windows. Japan is depicted both naturalistically and nostalgically, from the old woman at the food stall to the movie billboards in Yubari. Hou claims that he likes Taipei,²³ yet he seems to like Yubari more because it is so much like Fengshan, the village he grew up in.²⁴

At best, this film represents an ambitious, abortive project stopped in its first stage, which was too rushed as it was. Had the larger plan panned out, this would have been only the first of up to ten films all trying to capture changes in Taiwan as they happened, all of which would be re-edited once more in the year 2011.²⁵ This is an understandable project considering how central change is to the contemporary Taiwanese experience, but it is not surprising that it was not realized. Instead, *Millennium Mambo* is forced to stand alone as confirmation that the present continues to elude Hou’s effective capture on film. This is Hou at his most uncertain.

Café Lumière (2003)

Hou's next film is the result of a fortuitous mistaken identity. Shochiku, the longtime employer of the late Japanese master, Yasujiro Ozu, desired to commission a film to honor the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth on December 12, 2003. Few were surprised that their choice was not another Japanese director, but Hou Hsiao-hsien. One commentator expresses the conventional wisdom that Ozu "used long takes to allow freedom to his actors; Hou Hsiao-hsien is considered the director who has most carried on the Ozu legacy."²⁶ The problem is, contrary to what many think, Ozu was a highly editing-based director, unlike Hou. Moreover, even though Hou himself often speaks of Ozu, he does so not because he can identify with him, but because he envies how successfully Ozu captured contemporary Japan, something Hou has been unable to do with contemporary Taiwan.²⁷ Hou himself says many make this comparison only because Hou has used the Japanese-style houses which actually exist in Taiwan; otherwise he and Ozu are very different. (For example, Hou notes that he does not use Ozu's pronounced low camera position.)²⁸ Still, this did not prevent him from accepting the commission, and the result is *Café Lumière*.

One can argue that *Café Lumière* is true to the spirit of Ozu, but not the letter. This film is shot in Japan, with Japanese actors, speaking only Japanese. This film is also a sort of updating of the primary focus of Ozu — the Japanese family — only now it involves a daughter's pregnancy out of wedlock. (The father of the child is Taiwanese, but he is never seen.) Moreover, it does have that sense of Ozu-like mystery involving its protagonists: what are the true feelings between Yoko, the writer, and Hajime, the owner of a second-hand bookstore? Much like Setsuko Hara in Ozu films past, neither offers enough visible evidence for us to venture much more than a guess. All this notwithstanding, *Café Lumière* does not replicate the central aesthetic features Ozu is best known for. For example, this film remains staunchly Hou-like with an average shot length of 66 seconds per shot. (Ozu never pushed beyond 20 seconds per shot.) Moreover, this film is a lost opportunity of sorts for Hou to return to his earlier form. Ozu's camera, especially late in his career, was resolutely static. Yet Hou does revert to his own earlier incarnation in this film: more than half of the shots contain noticeable camera movements, and roughly another fifth have at least slight reframings. Thematically, *Café Lumière* represents an updating of Ozu, but stylistically not at all. Moreover, it provides further evidence that *Good Men, Good Women* remains a point of no return for Hou.

That being said, *Café Lumière* has to rank as one of Hou's most successful forays into contemporary subject matter, even if it is not Taiwan. Even without the temporal distance, Hou does have cultural distance, no matter what similarities Japan and Taiwan undeniably share. Furthermore, Yoko is

on an investigative quest to unearth historical traces of a Taiwanese figure once residing in Japan, yet finding only fragments, suggestions, much like Hou's own excavations of Taiwanese history. The film also displays flashes of Hou's subtle brilliance. When Yoko explains to her father and stepmother why she is not marrying her Taiwanese boyfriend, despite carrying his child, Hou carefully stages a three-shot in her apartment. The father is in a medium long-shot on the left side of the table, while the daughter is more towards the right and frontal. Just to the right of her and close, the stepmother's head is obliquely placed in the relation to the camera, only temporarily blocking our view of Yoko. Particularly effective here is how the father stops eating midway as his daughter broaches this unpleasant topic, yet to the end he says nothing about it (figure 34). Hou accomplishes this without recourse to emphatic cut-ins. The most notable moment is during a long take on a Tokyo train. The camera pans away from Yoko, who is not looking out, to a window showing an adjacent train passing by in the same direction, only slightly faster. Through that window on the other train we can see Hajime looking out of his train, and yet he is equally unaware of his close proximity to her. Perhaps symbolizing a missed opportunity for both, this shows that even unexpected opportunities like *Café Lumière* are proof that the unpredictable Hou is still an interesting Hou. As difficult as it is to define compared to the past, it is still more difficult to dismiss him.



Figure 34

Ozu-like subtlety via different stylistic means in *Café Lumière* (2003).

***Three Times* (also known as *The Best of Times*) (2005)**

Three Times is either a success or failure, depending on the criteria. It was entered in the competition at Cannes in 2005, yet Hou was reportedly disappointed by it not taking the top prize. The film reaffirms that Hou still is the master of historical material, yet it also suggests that present-day Taiwan will always elude his capture. Hou's intention here seems transparent enough. In the promotional materials he says he hoped to film the fragmentary memories which stick with him, such as when he was in a pool hall

in his youth. The literal Chinese title is “the best times,” yet Hou qualifies the superlative: “‘the best’ not because we can’t forget them, because they are things that have now been lost. The reason they’re the best is that they exist only in our memories. I have the feeling that this is not the last film I’ll make in this vein.”²⁹ This arguably explains the successful first third of this film which takes place in southern Taiwan in 1966, taken directly from Hou’s own youth. However, it does not quite explain whose memories are invoked in the second or third parts of this cinematic triptych, which take place in Taiwan in 1911 and 2005 respectively. At best, Hou can only imagine what comprises the patchy memories of generations not his own: the last third in particular do not feel like memories at all.

It is understandable why many have tried to decipher the deeper meanings of this tripartite structure. One Taiwanese writer suggests a deeper cultural meaning to the three sections: the first represents the American influence on Taiwan’s culture, seen most of all in the choice of music; the second instead focuses on Chinese culture in Taiwan; the third, by contrast, is a Japanese interpretation of contemporary Taiwanese youth culture since they seem obsessed with death.³⁰ While suggestive of the first two sections (but not without some qualifications), this use of Japanese culture appears too schematic in trying to explain the last portion of the film. More consistently, observers have noted how the first third of the film offers reminders of *The Boys from Fengkuei*, the second of *Flowers of Shanghai*, while the third of *Millennium Mambo*.³¹ Yet even this may be too schematic. It would be more accurate to describe the three disparate parts as Hou’s reprisals and reflections on three distinct types of subject matter he has long grappled with: the largely autobiographical material predominating in the New Cinema period, followed by the more distant historical backdrops of *City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, *Good Men*, *Good Women* (in part) and *Flowers of Shanghai*, and ending with the always elusive subject matter of contemporary Taiwan previously attempted in *Daughter of the Nile*, *Good Men*, *Good Women* (in part), *Goodbye South*, *Goodbye* and *Millennium Mambo*. Consciously or not, Hou is seemingly taking stock of his entire career, as if this was intended to be his last film.

The first third of the film, in 1966, does conjure up memories of Hou’s New Cinema period. Nearly every thematic element can be traced to his feature-length works between 1983 and 1986. Most prominent are the ample images of pool halls, which can be found in all four of these earlier films. The looming draft plays a role in more than one of Hou’s New Cinema films as well. The boat on Kaohsiung harbor reminds one of similar shots in *Boys*; the role of letters reminds us of a key motif in *Dust in the Wind*; the early image of Chang Chen on a bicycle is very similar to images of the young Hou in *A Time to Live*, *A Time to Die*. The final two scenes involve food and trains

much like *Dust*. Even the female boss of the pool hall is a faint reminder of the female boss of the print shop in the same film.

Yet this is not strictly a return to an earlier Hou; it is more like Hou's idealization of his own cinematic past. This time he uses recognizable stars (Chang Chen and Shu Qi), not non-professionals. The ASL for this portion of the film is just over 39 seconds per shot, yet the camera cannot stay still in over 85% of them — an inverse of his New Cinema style. Even more significant is how little dialogue is used. The soundtrack instead is dominated by the music of the era, mostly American, but also includes one popular tune in Taiwanese. Moreover, unlike the abortive romances in earlier New Cinema films, this time the protagonist persists in his dogged pursuit of a young woman until he wins her. This is not realism; this is a creative and nostalgic reconfiguration of the past. Hou admits as much in the comment quoted above.

Much the same can be said for the other two parts. The second section amalgamates the films which dealt with more distant historical eras (figure 35). Like *City of Sadness* and the *The Puppetmaster*, it deals with the domestic realm in historically significant times — in this case the Chinese revolution of 1911, which did not change anything in Taiwan. Over forty dialogue titles were used to overcome the difficulties of speaking an older version of Taiwanese, a reminder of the dreamlike flow of certain sections of *City* involving the deaf-mute Wen-ching. Likewise, Shu Qi's world as a courtesan do not just resemble *Flowers of Shanghai*, her playing of a traditional instrument connects obliquely to the traditional arts seen in *The Puppetmaster*. Meanwhile, the present-day Taiwan of 2005 still reprises the same aimless youth of *Daughter of the Nile*; *Good Men, Good Women*; *Goodbye South, Goodbye*



Figure 35

This image from *Three Times* (2005) is a seeming amalgamation of images from both *City of Sadness* and *Flowers of Shanghai*.

and *Millennium Mambo*, including extended shots of the young couple on a motorcycle, a familiar trope for Hou when trying to convey the present. More quickly edited than any recent Hou film (36 second per shot even excluding dialogue titles), once again there is enough to indicate not only how much this is a Hou film, but also how difficult it is for Hou to ever return to an earlier stage of his career.

The Flight of the Red Balloon (2007)

By the time many of you read this study there will likely already be another Hou film on the horizon, most likely a swordplay piece about a legendary swordswoman, Nie Yanniang, something Hou has desired to make for most of this decade. Yet the *Red Balloon* itself is not so much an arbitrary as a fitting end. To be sure, this represents Hou's first film to take place outside of Asia, in present-day Paris. It also failed to make the competition at Cannes in 2007, shown only in the festival's *Un Certain Regard*. Still, this is the first Hou work to garner a semi-regular (albeit very limited) release in the United States, including the IFC Center in New York and the Landmark Theater chain elsewhere. The upshot of this remains to be seen, but the mostly positive American reviews, plus the film's multiple-week runs in such art venues, suggest that this could be Hou's breakthrough in the United States where he is still little known.

Despite its Parisian setting, its French star, Juliette Binoche (Suzanne), and Chu Tien-wen's absence as a screenwriter for the first time since Hou's early commercial period, this film still displays salient connections to the Hou studied in these previous pages. True to old form, Hou had not even seen Lamorisse's classic short until commissioned by the Musee d'Orsay to remake it. J. Hoberman reports that Hou did not write down any dialogue for the actors,³² indicating that a cornerstone of Hou's modus operandi was transplanted to a new milieu. Hou pursues the long take with a renewed vigor, clocking in at around 75 seconds per shot, much longer on average than his previous film. True to the later Hou, around 90% of these are mobile long takes: even the most prominent static shot, showing Suzanne in a prolonged phone conversation in a moving car, includes the ever-moving reflections on the windshield. The most notable long take occurs in Suzanne's cluttered Paris apartment, exhibiting a remarkably dense layering of action and details. As Manhola Dargis describes it: "Out of this chaos — Simon playing, Suzanne yelling, the piano tuner tuning, and Song simply moving among them — Mr. Hou creates the world."³³ This harks back to Hou's interior settings in his best films, including *City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster* and *Flowers of Shanghai*, which are also complete worlds unto themselves. Even Suzanne's profession, a puppeteer, belies a strong connection to Hou's past work: she interprets a Chinese puppet play into French, yet she learns this

from a Chinese master, played in the film by Li Tianlu's real-life son. Then there is the food, and the marked ellipses falling between mere glimpses of life fragments which together make up a much larger picture imagined by us, but not seen . . . all unmistakably Hou.

One can safely speculate that had Andre Bazin lived long enough, he would have championed Hou as he championed Jean Renoir, Orson Welles or the Italian neo-realists. But how Bazinian is Hou? Moreover, what would Bazin have said about Hou's remake of the 1956 original, a film Bazin once wrote about? Even as late as 1989, Hou apparently was unaware of who Bazin was, forced to consult with Chu Tien-wen when asked about possible connections between his films and the famed French film theorist.³⁴ There is no denying that Hou is arguably the most Bazinian filmmaker today in his dogged pursuit of the long take, but there is one point where Hou diverges from Bazin, and that is the role of the filmmaker. Bazin called the original *Red Balloon* "a documentary of the imagination" because it did not rely on montage, but on the "spatial density of something real" to create the imaginary — in this case a seemingly sentient balloon which follows a young boy through Paris.³⁵ This is consistent with Bazin's underlying ontological assumptions about cinema, where the best filmmakers, according to him, do not undercut the cinema's uncanny ability to record phenomenological reality in all of its ambiguity. Here, however, Hou demonstrates his own awareness that there is always that intervening creative force even when one avoids the machinations of montage. Hou employs a stand-in for himself in the form of Song, a real-life Chinese film student in Paris who is not only a film student in the film, but also a nanny to Simon, Suzanne's son. There is no back story to Song in this film other than that she is involved in certain projects, including a current remake of the *Red Balloon*. She never is really involved in the muted dramas of Suzanne's life, only observing as an outsider. The film also suggests there are limits to what she (or Hou) can observe: despite its seeming omnipresence, Song never notices the crimson balloon even when it reflects on glass outside the flat. (She is too busy looking at her footage on the computer screen.) More significantly, Song reveals to Suzanne how the medium itself does not just record, but manipulates, such as the digital erasure of those who maneuver the balloon for the camera.

Bazin likely would not have been so comfortable with these reflexive acknowledgements. Nevertheless, unlike in *Good Men, Good Women*, in this case the self-reflexivity is done with great subtlety, and without didacticism or blunt forcefulness. Moreover, the film succeeds because Hou once more finds that requisite distance, in this case, cultural. As Hoberman notes, "Hou appears to have accepted his distance from the material — and worked with it. *Flight of the Red Balloon* is explicitly an outsider's movie, full of odd perspectives and founded on dislocation."³⁶ Hou has always worked best from

Updated Conclusion

Hou Hsiao-hsien and *The Assassin* (2015)

When this study first appeared in 2009, *The Flight of the Red Balloon* had premiered at Cannes two years earlier. Of the three films Hou made after *Millennium Mambo* in 2001, only *Three Times* in 2005 had been entered into the actual competition for the Palme d'Or at Cannes. *Three Times* was also the only of these three films that had been shot in Taiwan: produced entirely in Japan, *Café Lumière* (2003) came away empty-handed at Venice; despite being shot entirely in Paris, *The Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007) was "relegated" to the Cannes sidebar, *Un Certain Regard*, where it also received no awards. It was almost as if the more "global" Hou had become, the less global notoriety he received. Hou Hsiao-hsien's career now seemed to be in partial eclipse.

Global film culture played a small role in preventing a total eclipse from occurring. Conferences and screenings at University of California, Berkeley (2010), University of Toronto (2010), and even the Toronto International Film Festival's Lightbox (2013), all helped maintain some visibility. Hou and Chu Tien-wen personally attended conferences dedicated to him in Nagoya, Japan (2011), and most recently in Belgium (2015), immediately after the premiere of *The Assassin* at Cannes. Hou and his entourage also generously gave time to be interviewed in a recent anthology, *Hou Hsiao-hsien*, edited by Richard Suchenski (which complements this study well).¹ That anthology is associated with a retrospective ("*Also Like Life*": *The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien*) that has been traveling globally, also curated by Suchenski through Bard College's recently founded Center for Moving Image Arts. The timing of this retrospective, coupled with the recent conference in Belgium, belies a healthy academic cottage industry offering ancillary support to Hou's more rarified festival career, something Hou recognizes.

Nevertheless, there remained a creeping sense that a partial eclipse might turn into a total one. Questions abounded about whether Hou's next film, *The Assassin*, would ever materialize: the scripting phase had only commenced in September of 2009; test shooting only began in September of 2010 in the ancient Japanese capital of Nara. Yet principal shooting would be delayed for another two years until October of 2012. Even then there was multiple reports of problems and delays: production stopped twice in

Notes

Foreword

1. 春日在天涯，天涯日又斜，鶯啼如有淚，為濕最高花。“The sun on the horizon, the horizon sun is oblique; the bird call is like a tear, the highest wet flower.”
2. Michael Berry (interviewer), and Tianwen Zhu (editor), *Zhu hai shi guang* 《煮海時光》: *Hou Xiaoxian de guang ying ji yi* [Boiling the sea: Hou Hsiao-hsien's memories of shadows and light] (Xinbei Shi: INK, 2014).

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9. Peggy Chiao 焦雄屏, “When Will Taiwan Keep Step with Taiwanese Cinema?” *Commonwealth Magazine* 天下雜誌 (January 1, 2000): 123.
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12. The best summary of this critical paradigm is still Roy Armes's *Third World Film Making and the West*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
13. Yeh Yueh-yu 葉月瑜, "Taiwanese New Cinema: Nativism's 'Other'," *Chung-wai Literary Monthly* 中外文學 27: 8 (January, 1999): 60.
14. Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 85.
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17. John Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978): 149–50.
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21. *Ibid.*, 88.
22. Clunas, 54–56.
23. Li Zehou, *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1994): 154.
24. *Ibid.*, 142. And yet Li Bai does follow one very longstanding tradition in Chinese art: an affinity to alcohol, even saying once, according to Du Fu, that he was "a genius at wine." (See *ibid.*, 141.) It should be noted that Hou is an adept perpetrator of this tradition as well, albeit he often adds the modern touch of karaoke singing.
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36. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): 29–38.
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9. Li, 57.
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