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Guest Editors' Introduction

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Guest Editors' Introduction

Yomi Braester and Nicole Huang

In 1991, a group of critics published a collection entitled *Xin dianying zhi si* (The death of New Cinema), in which they argued that Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Beiqing chengshi* (City of sadness, 1989) skirted the more hard-hitting issues of Taiwan's White Terror. In their account, the New Taiwan Cinema had betrayed its mission to present an unadorned and critical image of Taiwanese society. Although the attack may have missed the power in Hou's circumspect reference to the White Terror atrocities, the volume's catchy title points to the genuine perception that Taiwan cinema was in crisis. The news of its death was premature, as evidenced by the continued production of award-winning films, even though government subsidies waned and Taiwan films have largely remained dependent on the international film festival circuit (with the notable exception of Lee Ang's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*).

Explaining the origins of this perceived crisis in the early 1990s may also help provide a context for understanding the essays in this issue. New Taiwan Cinema, which came to the fore in the mid-1980s, had sought to undermine easy political distinctions in Taiwan. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang suggests that modernism was urban, cosmopolitan, and elitist and presented a pan-Chinese view of culture; nativist resistance was more concerned with rural themes, Taiwanese history, and social protest and favored Taiwanese independence. Even before the demise of Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988 and the ascendancy of the Democratic Progressive Party to power in the 1990s, the New Cinema appealed to both modernist and

nativist sensibilities. The proclaimed death of the New Cinema was to a large extent the end of a Taiwan cinema that could be interpreted in a political key. The critics of *City of Sadness* lamented, in fact, precisely the more nuanced vision of politics and history that new filmmakers set out to achieve.

The six essays in this issue refer to the Taiwan film scene, as it has been shaped by the New Cinema in the last two decades, and suggest interpretive approaches that avoid crass political categorizations. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Ban Wang move beyond the internal political debates in Taiwan and look at films by Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang, and Hou Hsiao-hsien as responses to the unifying vision of globalism, which threatens all forms of local identity. Robert Chi looks at the “New Taiwanese Documentary,” which emerged parallel to the New Taiwan Cinema, and draws analogies between the better-known feature films and the development of documentary film. James Udden focuses on the prehistory of the New Cinema, in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s early work. Carlos Rojas, Yomi Braester, and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh provide a context of the New Cinema in contemporary social and cultural issues—public health, urban planning, and popular music, respectively. At the same time, the essays cover milestones along the chronological trajectory of the New Cinema and its contemporary culture, from Hou Hsiao-hsien’s apprenticeship (Udden) and early urban films (Braester), through the heyday of the New Cinema in the early 1990s (Yeh, Rojas, and Braester) and to Hou’s recent work (Wang) and growing interest in documentary filmmaking (Chi).

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh makes a strong argument for reading Edward Yang’s films, in particular *Gulingjie shaonian sharen shijian* (*A brighter summer’s day*, 1989), through their musical soundtracks, which she says point to postcolonial anxieties. Yeh challenges Fredric Jameson’s assumption that modernist aesthetics proceeds synchronically in different cultures and can be interpreted in similar fashion everywhere. Edward Yang’s films are known for using Taipei’s transnational landmarks, such as the Hard

Rock Café, TGI Fridays, and Ruth Chris' steakhouse, but these locales must be understood also as part of a resistance to universal values, which are often no more than a cover-up for American imperialism. The English title of *A Brighter Summer Day*, after a mistranscribed Elvis Presley song, is emblematic of the subversive uses of transcultural mimicry.

Yomi Braester examines the interaction between urban planning and film and argues that the cinema creates a realm parallel to the city's spaces, where the architectural past is both commemorated and erased. One salient feature of Taipei's development since the 1970s has been the evacuation and demolition of veterans' villages (*juancun*) to create municipal parks. Focusing on Yu Kanping's *Da cuoche* (*Wrong car*, 1983), Stan Lai's *Feixia Ada* (*The Red Lotus Society*, 1994) and Tsai Ming-liang's *Aiqing wansui* (*Vive l'amour*, 1994), Braester traces the New Cinema's debt to the growing urban unrest. The films not only witness the city's transformation but also shape collective memory.

Carlos Rojas also looks at the spatial references in Tsai Ming-liang's films, and finds in *Qingshaonian Nezha* (*Rebels of the Neon God*, 1992) an allusion to the symbiosis of Taipei's development and the fate of the New Cinema. Urban spaces also become metonyms for social boundaries, which Tsai shows in the process of being contested and compromised. The protagonist in *Rebels* lives in an electrically and electronically powered world that facilitates physical and social mobility, only to be confronted with the limitations of his action and movement. He can negotiate urban spaces only by violent transgression and allusion to pathological contagion—both of which are present, for example, in a scene in which he vandalizes a motorbike and sprays the word "AIDS" onto it.

Ban Wang picks up the themes of contagion and doom in discussing Tsai's *Dong* (*The hole*, 1998), in which a virus threatens to annihilate Taipei. Wang argues that both *The Hole* and Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Qianxi manbo* (*Millennium mambo*, 2001) use millennial anxieties to signal the collapse of global geopolitics. The utopian dream that associates global free

economy, fast communication, abundance of consumer goods, and spread of democratic governance leaves little space for local identity. *The Hole* portrays a Kafkaesque nightmare of a new world disorder, rife with technological breakdown and public health crises. In the same vein, *Millennium Mambo* shows how existence is reduced to easy and meaningless libidinal outlets. Sex, drugs, and violence become the only refuge from the numbing economy that dominates not only consumption but also human emotions. These films can also be regarded as allegories of the troubled place of the New Taiwan Cinema in an increasingly homogenous world cinema.

James Udden also challenges cultural labels, yet he does so by foregrounding not the ideological context, but rather industry conventions. Udden addresses the neglected early career of Hou Hsiao-hsien and examines the environment from which the would-be director drew positive models and negative examples. Hou's technique derives from his experience as a stagehand and assistant director, when the future director was exposed to the production values of romance films. Hou's hallmark minimalism and unique filmic language is indebted to this apprenticeship. Robert Chi draws attention to another aspect of Taiwan's cinema, namely the increasing interest in documentary filmmaking. Chi traces its development in the context of Taiwan's mediascape and argues that the fluidity and hybridity of documentary films allowed the genre and its practitioners to generate new social spaces and identities. The recent output of what Chi calls the "New Taiwanese Documentary" has run parallel to the New Taiwan Cinema and shares many of the issues of feature filmmaking in Taiwan. The New Taiwanese Documentary has inherited the artistic aspirations of the New Cinema and points to the paradox facing Taiwan's contemporary film industry as a whole: namely, that conscious engagement with local themes is often more marketable abroad. Yet unlike the New Cinema, the documentary films, despite their international acclaim, are likely to remain a primarily local and regional form.

The essays in this issue reveal the continued interest, at least in academia, in Taiwan cinema. Taiwan filmmakers, however, continue to see signs of crisis. In a forum that inspired this volume, the producer and film critic Peggy Hsiung-ping Chiao lamented, "While Taiwan films are being praised widely in international film circuits, our egos have been completely shattered at home." The script-writer and director Wu Nien-jen passionately asked: "If Taiwan's films are only being watched and appreciated by audiences outside of Taiwan, are we still talking about a Taiwanese cinema here? Is the discussion of a national cinema even possible in the case of Taiwan?"

We first envisioned this special issue as an upshot of a three-day event, *Island of Light: A Symposium on Taiwan Cinema and Popular Culture*, coordinated by Nicole Huang at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in March 2002. We would like to thank the University of Wisconsin and the Republic of China government for their generous sponsorship. Edward Friedman and David Bordwell offered important input, and the two honored guests at the symposium, Wu Nien-jen and Peggy Hsiung-ping Chiao, gave rare insights into the Taiwanese film industry. The conference provided the impetus for rethinking Taiwan cinema and popular culture in this volume. Our special gratitude goes to Kirk Denton, who greeted our idea for a special issue with enthusiasm, unwavering support, and expert advice. We thank all those who responded to the call for papers and regret that we could not include all in this issue.