

Taiwanese New Cinema: Emotions, Identity and Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the cultural complexities of Taiwanese New Cinema (TNC) as a particular kind of national cinema produced within an especially diverse national context. Since the 1980s a number of new films and new directors emerged. These films showed obvious difference compared with old Taiwanese political or commercial films. TNC has been a vital element in enabling the world to perceive Taiwan's cultural identity. I argue that the strategy of considering auteur director as the signifier of national style involves accounting for historical and cultural context in which directors find themselves situated. The paper is not just framework for discussing the various talents of auteur directors, but a necessary device for exploring the ways that the cultural identity of Taiwan is constructed, interpreted and explored by the authorial and artistic visions of a number of auteur directors involved in producing TNC. The films of TNC as a particular kind of emotional textures, in turn, also contribute to how the emotions of being Taiwanese are projected and are manifest within an especially diverse national context.

Keywords: Taiwanese new cinema; auteur directors; identities; emotions

INTRODUCTION

I will start by introducing the historical and cinematic link between Taiwan and Chinese mainland. I will then explore the complexities of Taiwan in terms of national cinema by both employing and contesting theories of cultural identity and imagined communities (Hall, 1993; Anderson 1991, etc.), with special attention to the consciousness of 'nativeness' in TNC. This paper also explores the link between auteur directors and the concerns of the national. It also investigates the historical complex, humanism and sadness of being "Taiwanese" projected by the films of TNC. The 1980s is also the crucial period when Taiwanese cinema received international attention and Taiwanese cultural identity was projected through the films of a number of auteur directors.

Writing about Taiwan's relationship with China is problematic since both countries have their own opinions regarding which one is the legitimate site of China as nation-state and Chinese culture. According to June Chun Yip (1997: 139), "One of the most crucial factors that binds a group of people into a 'nation' is 'the possession in common of a rich legacy of 'memories', a shared heritage which, through repetition, creates and reinforces a sense of historical continuity and sense of community". This is particularly the case in Taiwan when Kuo MinTang (KMT) relocated its government in Taiwan following its defeat in Mainland China in 1949 as the KMT's aim was to consecrate Taiwan as the rightful heir to China's five-thousand-year imperial tradition against the Communist regime in Mainland China.

Traditional readings of national cinemas which focus on the development of a cinema within a particular national boundary are problematic in the broader Chinese case. The complex history of colonization, migrations, and disputed nation-state politics relating to Taiwan further complicates the study of Taiwanese cinema. Taiwan's cultural complexities followed

various political shifts in its history such as the end of Japanese colonization at the end of the second World War, Kuo Ming Tan's autarchy in Taiwan in 1947 symbolized by the Incident of 28th February, and the year of 1949 when the military defeat of KMT to Mao's Communist army in Mainland China forced its retreat to Taiwan. Since then, the argument regarding who is the legitimate site for China as nation-state and Chinese culture has raged between Chinese mainland and Taiwan.

TAIWAN'S CULTURAL COMPLEXITIES

Taiwan has been dominated by different regimes since the twentieth century and it is in many ways an island without roots. Due to complicated historical and political reasons, the construction and development of Taiwan's culture is multifaceted. As part of China's territory since ancient times, Taiwan is influenced by the core Chinese traditional cultures such as Confucianism and Taoism but it is also shaped at certain levels by Japanese culture and Western culture (American culture).

Stuart Hall (1993: 393) points out that there are two senses of identity: identity-as-being and identity-as-becoming. The first interpretation defines cultural identity as a kind of collective culture and a true oneness. "This oneness, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence..." (Hall, 1993: 393) The second sense defines identity as discontinuous points of identification. Hall (1993) suggests that despite common ground, there are also some fundamental and important distinctions that construct the true and present *we*. Thus, cultural identities are far from being eternally fixed in some 'essentialised' past. They are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Based on the above two definitions, it can be seen that cultural identity is not static, unchanged or "an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent which can be reproduced by any new cultural practice" (Hall, 1993: 392). On the contrary, it is always in a dynamic process of changing. Benedict Anderson (1991) also emphasizes 'Imagined Communities' and argues that cultural identity is constructed by memory, 'the imaginary', narrative and allegory. Hall (1993: 395) furthers this, claiming that "cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*". Such careful positioning is necessary for the study of Taiwanese cinema which, as Needham (2006: 363) claims, "is particularly true of Taiwanese cinema which occupies a fairly marginal position even within the study of Asian cinema simply because it is often subsumed under the all-encompassing rubric of Chinese cinema".

As mentioned earlier, KMT has sought to reform Taiwan in terms of building it as a nation-state since 1949. Within this politically-manipulated construction, there has been "a systematic suppression of the island's aboriginal past, of local history, and of Taiwan's complex heritage of non-Chinese colonization, particularly its development under the Dutch (1624-1662) and the Japanese (1895-1945)" (Yip, 1997: 139). When political pressure decreased following KMT's turn to a democratic ideology in the 1980s, the exploration and projecting of national identity was initiated by a number of auteur directors of TNC (similar to the case of the Fifth Generation in Hong Kong's new cinema) whose films addressed issues of 'nativeness' in relation to Taiwan's history. Thus the consciousness of 'nativeness' is one major ideology of the auteur directors of TNC. Contrary to such dominant Taiwanese ideology, Ang Lee who emerged in early 1990s, took Taiwanese cinema to broader international attention by making films addressing transnational markets. His auteur status also symbolises the promotion of Taiwanese cinema as a transnational cinema since 1990s.

As Needham (2006: 363) points out: “the question of the appropriateness of the function of authorship in Asian cinemas also needs to account for the agency of the director as someone with the lived experiences of, for example, colonialism or diasporic identification”. The concept of the author in the broader Chinese case has made it easier to discuss films without having any specialist knowledge of the institutions and ideologies that have shaped them. However, this may fail to recognize specific cultural forces and contextual parameters in which a film is made or an auteur emerges. If Hong Kong cinema is an example of how national/cultural identity is negotiated between its motherland and its colonizer, then Taiwanese cinema provides an interesting case of how national/cultural identity intersects with nativist movement, post-colonial discourse and ultimately the transition of national cinema in a global commodification culture. In Taiwan, different cultures (Chinese, Dutch, Japanese and American) encountered each other and interacted. At the same time a local Taiwanese culture also developed and assimilated with the influences of the above cultural ideologies. In the same way as Hong Kong, Taiwan is also marked by one of the characteristics of post-colonialism: cultural hybridity. Taiwan’s cultural identity, instead of being one dimensional, appears to be pluralistic. The representations of these complicated cultural influences can be seen in Taiwanese cinema, especially in TNC of the 1980s. The investigation of ‘Chineseness’ in Taiwanese cinema will illustrate a marked inherent connection in terms of cultural identity between mainland China and Taiwan.

Taiwanese New Cinema and the Consciousness of ‘Nativeness’

TNC began with the film: *In Our Times* (Tao Dechen, Edward Yang, Ke Yizhing, Zhangyi, 1982). This film is composed of four independent stories directed by four young directors. The film broke new ground by representing the social changes in Taiwanese society from the 1950s to the 1980s. The following year, *Growing Up* (written by Hsiao-Hsien Hou, directed by Chen Kunhou, 1983) drew the attention of film critics in Taiwan. The film won several awards at the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival in 1983. In the following couple of years, more films, such as *The Sandwich Man* (Hsiao-Hsien Hou, 1983), *Days of Watching Sea* (Wang Tong, 1983) and *One Day on the Beach* (Edward Yang, 1983) were released and a new wave of Taiwanese cinema emerged.

These films brought a certain degree of realism to Taiwanese cinema. The directors/writers of TNC were interested in stories of daily life in real social environment. Many of the films can be labelled as personal growth narratives, such as *In Our Time*, *Growing Up*, *One Day on the Beach*, and *Taipei Story* (Edward Yang, 1985). Autobiographical films such as *A Summer at Grandpa’s* (Hsiao-Hsien Hou, 1984) and *A Time to Live and A Time to Die* (Hsiao-Hsien Hou, 1985) also took an important role in TNC. These films illustrate a collective record of the development of Taiwan in the past few decades before the 1980s. They showed Taiwan’s development and explored changes in thinking with regard to modernity. Before TNC, the ideology of ‘Taiwaneseness’ was absent from the island’s literature and cinema.

1980s’ Taiwan was in a transition from agricultural society to industrial society and it was labelled as one of “the Four Little Dragons” of Asia along with Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea (Chen, 1998: 556). The economic boom along with increasing urbanization encouraged Taiwanese filmmakers to explore and meditate on the notion of Taiwanese identity, a small island geographically separated but historically and culturally related to mainland China. Thus the 1980s is a period when the people of Taiwan became increasingly conscious of their own ‘nativeness’. TNC also promoted a national cinema which as I have already said caught the attention of Western film critics.

As Andrew Higson (2002) suggests, the projection of a distinctive 'Otherness' is an essential strategy in order for a national cinema to compete with Hollywood. Fan (1996) explains that:

"Out of Taiwan's total populations of 21.3 million, there are more than three hundred and fifty thousand who are indigenous tribal peoples".

In the Taiwanese case, 'native' not only refers to the island itself, but also Taiwanese indigenous people based in the region for centuries and their cultural tradition. However, the interesting point for Taiwanese filmmakers is their meditation and reflection on, and interpretation of, the images of natives and national/local histories and signs. Taiwan's specific geography, its mix of cultural identities (both immigrants and indigenous inhabitants) within Taiwan itself, and the on going political uncertainty all tend to complicate the nation's relationship with wider notions of 'Chineseness'.

As a *new cinema* TNC shares common strategies of filmmaking with other so-called new wave cinemas such as the French New Wave Cinema and Italian Neo-Realist Cinema. Their core strategy was to abandon classical Hollywood style narratives and adopt forms of social realism as their ideology. In a similar way to their new wave counterparts in Europe, TNC adopted the strategy of 'imperfect cinema' (Espinosa, 1979). This is partly due to the nature of their ideology of filmmaking, and partly due to the relative difficult condition of filmmaking for these young filmmakers. Espinosa (1979) notes: "Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique. It can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera, in a studio or in a guerrilla camp in the middle of the jungle...The only thing it is interested in is how an artist responds to the following question: What are you doing in order to overcome the barrier of the "cultured" elite audience which up to now has conditioned the form of your work.

In order to portray the real life experience of the Taiwanese people, the filmmakers of TNC placed the protagonists in realistic life situations. They advocated that a film should neither idealise nor deliberately distort the lives of its protagonists. In terms of filming, they employed a large amount of long shots, deep focus shots and used realistic locations (a documentary or realist mode of filmmaking style) with non-professional actors.

TNC committed itself to the cinematic representation of Taiwan's local histories and explored issues of 'nativeness / Taiwanese' identity. These films also expressed a positive attitude towards Taiwanese society, which leads to the discussion of the term 'consciousness of nativeness'. However, the majority of Taiwanese people are also Chinese. The influence of Chinese traditional culture in the films of these Taiwanese auteurs is enormous. The discussions of Taiwan's cultural identity would be superficial without reference to its cultural roots linked with and from Mainland China. In the next section I will explore the continuity of Chinese traditions and culture in the films of a number of auteurs of TNC.

'Chineseness' in Taiwanese New Cinema

Although Taiwan has undergone some extreme political changes in its history, none of the political regimes has severed Taiwan's connection with Mainland China. Since the 1930s many Taiwanese inhabitants have come from Fu Jian and Guang Dong, two provinces in the Southern China. Due to the influence of Confucianism, the concept of family has great importance among people of Chinese origin and they treasure the relationship of consanguinity (Consanguineous affection advocated by Confucianism) and ceremonies for their ancestors. These Chinese traditions and cultural characteristics were preserved and

developed in Taiwan by Chinese immigrants. These influences can also be seen in many films of TNC in the 1980s.

As a film which symbolises the emergence of TNC, *The Sandwich Man* is composed of three different stories: *Son's Doll* (Hsiao-Hsien Hou, 1983), *The Taste of Apple* (Wan Jen, 1983) and *That Hat of Xiaoqi* (Zeng Zhuangxiang, 1983). In *Son's Doll*, the young protagonist Kun Shu makes a living by being disguised as a clown for a local cinema's advertising. Later on when he takes his disguise off, his little son fails to recognise him. Sadly, he has to disguise himself again as a clown and to be his son's doll. This film reveals ordinary peoples' difficult situation of making a living during the development of Taiwan from an agricultural to industrial society. *The Taste of Apple* tells a story about an unfortunate character Ah Fa and the film criticizes Taiwanese blind worship for the US through Ah Fa's deferential behaviour in front of westerners.

Deep concern with history and social responsibility has always been a central ideology for Chinese intellectuals in Chinese history. *The Sandwich Man* is an important film in TNC. Hou is also sensitive to represent history in his films. The most acclaimed contribution he made to Taiwan's politics is *A City of Sadness*. Together with another two films: *A Time to Live and A Time to Die* and *The Puppet Master* (Hsiao-hsien Hou, 1993), these three films are labeled as Hou's 'Trilogy of Sadness'. *A City of Sadness* refers to a number of important historical events between 1945 and 1949: the surrender of Japan at discretion and the repatriation of Japanese in Taiwan; KMT's takeover of Taiwan; and the incident of 28th February. By focusing its narrative on the fate of a family, the film opens out the cruelty and violence of Taiwan's politics and history by focusing on the fate of a common Taiwanese family. Also, positioning characters in a series of historical contexts (such as the end of Japanese occupation and Taiwan's separation from Mainland China), the film also represents Taiwan's cultural hybridity: colonial occupation, political horror, and multiple waves of refugees.

A City of Sadness speaks of the bitterness of the islanders' memories, without directly representing the trauma of the incident of 28th February. The intertwining of public and political history with this network of personal narratives links the fates of the Lin family and their friends with the fate of Taiwan. Films made in Taiwan since early 1980s are marked by a preoccupation of sadness and humanist concern. The subjects, filmic language and aesthetics of these films challenge the stereotype of old political films or commercial films in Taiwan before the 1980s. These new films possess rich connotation in terms of historical review, political concern and self-reflection of modern civilization. In many cases, they show deep concern for the lives of common people. As a consequence, the displays and **representations** of Taiwan's rapid changing history are a major concern of the auteur directors of TNC. By telling misery stories of common people in a specific historical period, these films show profound humanist concern. Hou's *A City of Sadness*, Edward Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* and Wang Tong's *Speechless Mountain* are all good examples of this. Hou's films show his constant preoccupation with the Taiwanese past that might easily be seen in Livingstonian terms as "an intended function of an utterance" (Livingston, 1997: 135). Hou continuously reconstructs the past that is useable in understanding current crises in Taiwanese history.

Along with Hsiao-hsien Hou and Wang Tong, Edward Yang stands as one of the most recognized of Taiwan's 'New Wave' directors. In 1991, Yang released his classic film: *A Brighter Summer Day*. The story is set in 1960s' Taiwan and reveals the transition of Xiao Si from a good middle school student to a teenage murderer under the influence of Taiwanese gangsters. The film criticises the era as a murderous one by depicting the story of the tragic teenage killer. Taiwanese director Wang Tong is often ignored by film scholarship. His films

address strong concerns about ordinary people. Tong emphasizes the social responsibility of filmmakers and what might be termed this consciousness of responsibility is continuous in TNC. It is also seen as a strong tradition of Chinese intellectuals in its history. Thus this consciousness of responsibility may well explain their obsession with history and social tensions.

Many artists of the new cinema regarded themselves as Chinese intellectuals and they were obsessed with the spirit of national suffering which is advertised by Confucianism. Taiwanese filmmakers intended to use cinema to represent public misery and this is one reason why realism shaped TNC. The construction of a Chinese Taiwan in the 1950s was manipulated by the KMT's political agenda and created a particular type of cinema through negative depiction of communist regime in Mainland China. Works of the TNC constructed a more cultural and artistic exploration. Abandoning the Governments' explicit political ideology, these auteur directors explored the complex nature of Taiwanese identity and illustrated the importance of a deep rooted connection with Chinese values at its heart.

CONCLUSION

The identity of Taiwan has become a central concern for the directors of TNC and they have worked to reposition Taiwan's identity within the present political situation. Thus they started to search Taiwan's roots in reflection of its history. Chen (1998: 559) notes: "In this sense, the TNC's obsession with history signals the end of an era and the beginning of a new one: the move from agricultural to an industrial society, from poor rural life to the urban centres, from political identification with China to that with Taiwan." Although symbolically projecting historical and political issues, TNC's concern with the common people's emotions is a dominant theme. This paper concentrated on Taiwanese cinema and in particular TNC. It examines how auteur directors (vision/styles etc.) emerge and the concerns of the nation that are being explored. It explored the ways that certain auteur directors (with distinctive vision/styles etc.) emerged and examined how ideas of the Taiwanese nation were represented by these directors. By focusing on TNC and the films which were elevated to the international pantheon of 'art cinema' and 'national cinema', I analyze how the complex nature of national/cultural identity was constructed, interpreted and manipulated by a number of key auteur-directors such as Hsiao-hsien Hou, Edward Yang, and Wang Tong. In particular the distinctive factor here is how the emotions (what I refer to as nostalgia, humanist concern, sadness and consciousness of misery) interweave with the diverse concerns of a complex and hybrid nation-state (indigenous, Japanese, Western/American and Chinese influences) to bring a different nuance of Taiwanese identity to the screen.

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