

# Taiwan Literature and New Taiwan Cinema

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"Taiwan Literature" and "Taiwan Cinema" have always possessed an extremely close relationship (for example, a great number of the works of author Qiong Yao have been modified for film). However, in earlier years Taiwan literature was adapted for the screen due more to commercial considerations than to the fact that the characteristics or elements related to "literature" itself had a great effect upon the creation of "cinema." It was not until the 1980s that "Taiwan Literature" and "Taiwan Cinema " began to engage in a truly meaningful dialogue. Due to this dialogue, "Taiwan Cinema" created a new era in film-making history. The films created during this new era are referred to as "New Taiwan Cinema."

Generally speaking, "New Taiwan Cinema " refers to the series of Taiwan films created in the midst of a revolution in the film-making industry between the years 1980 and 1990. This revolutionary movement was mustered by a new generation of Taiwan film-makers and directors, and what was "new" about these movies and film-makers was that they generally held true to real life or social phenomena, replacing the past focus on film-making for commercial interests with these new concerns. During this process, because various authors began to directly engage in the writing of scripts and the production of film, and also more because the new generation of directors used literary methods to create the form and language of their films, consequently, Taiwan cinema began to evince a style drastically different from that seen in the past.

With this basic understanding, we can go into greater detail to describe the relationship between Taiwan Literature and New Taiwan Cinema as well as explain the characteristics of New Taiwan Cinema:

Firstly, the themes of New Taiwan Cinema were largely drawn from personal or coming of age experiences, and they also directly related to the experience of contemporary Taiwan. Different coming of age tales came to form an interlace of varied "autobiographies," which, in the end, created a diverse Taiwan history. Consequently, there are those who believe that New Taiwan Cinema is actually "history written with shade and shadow." The series of films making up New Taiwan

Cinema was headed off by the 1982 film *In Our Time* (Guangyin de Gushi). This film embodies a natural, realistic style and literary manifestation as its major characteristics, and preliminarily demonstrated the differences between the new and old schools of film production. A year later, the 1983 film *Growing Up* (Xiaobi de Gushi) paved the way for new cinema, and the 1983 film *The Sandwich Man* (Erzi de Da Wanou) determined the existence of the phrase "New Taiwan Cinema." Finally, the 1989 film *A City of Sadness* (Beiqing Chengshi) came to represent the summit of New Taiwan Cinema after its maturity. Within this series of films, the film *Growing Up* is an adaptation of Zhu Tian-wen's short story of the same name. The adaptation of this story for the screen was mainly completed by Hou Xiao-xian, Ding Ya-min, Xu Shu-zhen, and Zhu Tian-wen. *The Sandwich Man* is a movie in three parts which takes themes from three of Huang Chun-ming's short stories, "The Sandwich Man," "Little Qi's Hat (Xiaoqi de Nading Maozi)," and "The Taste of Apples (Pingguo de Ziwei)," as its basis. Wu Nian-zhen, another author of that time, adapted these short stories for film. Additionally, Zhu Wen-tian and Wu Nian-zhen also completed the script for *A City of Sadness*. This trend of authors engaging in adaptation and modification, fully explains how New Cinema and the makers of this new cinema relied on contemporary authors and their works in order to create the major content of their films as well as make these films evince a definite "local" flavor.

However, at this time there were also many literary works which were modified for the screen that we cannot say are examples of "New Cinema." For example, the film *The Ox Cart for Dowry* (Jiazhuang Yiniuche) is an adaptation of Wang Zhen-he's short story by the same name, but the artistic quality of the film is extremely low. The reason for this is that the director of the film still placed a great deal of value on commercial interests and did not possess any new movie-making principles or any sort of film "self-consciousness." This film "self-consciousness" refers to the fact that new directors no longer strove for the dramatic conflict and deep dialogue valued by traditional "movie plays," and, instead, sought to fairly and evenly attend to the images, music, and language of film as well as put great effort into testing the various relationships and significances which could exist between sound and picture. This contributed to the strength of film as a form, and, whether or not they ended up resembling realistic or expressionistic pieces, these films no longer were dependent of comedy or entertainment, and, instead were an artistic form rich with the charm of image and sound. Directors of these films believed that the audience was the active interpreter of and the primary group to really experience these films. They did not believe the audience to be the passive receptacle of the film-maker's knowledge and notification that they were traditionally viewed to be. Consequently, these directors abandoned overly simplified, obvious or sentimental narrative methods, striving

instead for an experience of a more unclear and multiple nature, an experience which held more closely to the grey areas of real life. Films were no longer a direct and simple series of scenes, they were now back and forth flashes representing a breakdown of time and space as well as an intricately interwoven, emotional metaphor.

And this film aesthetic, which included many forms of metaphor as well as various layers of narrative viewpoints, and which also placed great value on evoking the personal imagination and interpretation of the audience, actually (and even unwittingly) dovetailed with the aesthetic characteristics of literature at the time. In the practical application of film techniques, we can examine the following aspects in order to better understand this new film aesthetic:

1. The use of different languages, sounds, and “off screen” narration:

The various relationships between language, sound, and scene are used to enrich the content and artistic conception of New Cinema. New Cinema can use a combination of dialect, Mandarin Chinese, English and/or Japanese to create a complicated cultural situation. It can also use overlapping narrations by different genders to suggest power and gender relationships. Of course, more possible still is the use of a contradiction between or a displacement of sound and scenery to convey an undertone of resistance or sarcasm.

2. The use of long shot or long takes

The camera shot or take is the unit which forms a film scene. In a long take, a scene is filmed using only one take from start to finish. In this type of shot there is no editing done and the shot must at least surpass one minute in length so as to allow the smallest details of a characters' life to come across in the most natural fashion.

3. The use of landscape Shots

A "Landscape Shot" refers to a shot in which natural scenery or different locations are depicted, but no characters (this mainly refers to characters who have some relationship to the plotline) are present. This type of shot is often used to set off scenery or to express certain emotions, or, when it is used to create or depict a certain artistic conception, it possesses very obvious abilities of emotional description. This method of filming unfurls a limitless imaginative space and sublimates the main theme or subject of the piece. Due to this phenomenon, the "Landscape Shot" is also called an "Emotionally Expressive Shot."

Below, the author will use examples from *Growing Up*, *The Taste of Apples* (one section of *The Sandwich Man*) as well as *A City of Sadness* to introduce the narrative aesthetics and concerns evinced in New Taiwan Cinema.

### 1. *Growing Up*

When New Taiwan Cinema was first developing, many of the works produced focused attention on childhood memories and coming of age experiences. *Growing Up*, a film adapted from an original work by Zhu Tian-wen, is a classic example of this type of film. *Growing Up* depicts the coming of age of a young man from a small village. From its depiction of the main character's frivolous youth of muddled ignorance to his development into a mature and responsible grown up, the film expresses a vivid and emotional recollection of life in early Taiwan. *Growing Up* combines various details of daily life, and the director, Chen Kun-hou, utilizes mid-distance and long-distance shots as well as long, un-cut takes to increase the level of focus on the characters' activities as well as communicate the realities of life and growing up.

### 2. *The Taste of Apples*

*The Taste of Apples* is adapted from Huang Chun-ming's short story, and it describes the tale of a 1950s family who has moved from the south of Taiwan to Taipei for work. One morning, when the head of the family, A Fa, is heading to work, he is injured when struck by an American Colonel's car. His worried wife rushes to the hospital, fearing that her family is doomed, but the cause of all the trouble, the American Colonel, gives A Fa's wife 50,000 dollars, sandwiches, soda, and apples, and promises to take full responsibility for everything. He is even willing to send the family's mute daughter to America for study. The entire situation of the film changes, and the car accident actually becomes a happy event, while the American Army Hospital becomes a sort of heaven.

*The Taste of Apples* reflects the condition of the lower classes in the 1970s and pokes fun at the "America worship" of people at that time. The film also includes a depiction of the interesting situations which occur with the combination of the Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English languages. For example, when A Fa's wife accidentally goes into the men's bathroom and forgets to lock the door, an American soldier enters and scares her to the point of screaming. The man apologizes hurriedly, but A Fa's wife mistakes his "I am sorry" as him criticizing her for "not locking the door." Additionally, when A Fa makes his complaint to the American colonel who

caused his accident, he uses a mixture of Mandarin and Taiwanese and quite a few interesting word combinations emerge in the process.

As to narrative structure and scene management, the director of this film, Wan Ren, evinces both his aim and his ability to condense text into powerful images through his filming techniques. For example, in the opening of the movie, after the car accident occurs, the director uses a depressed angle camera shot to film a chalk outlined figure on the ground, and suddenly the scene changes from black and white to color. The red color of fresh blood is extremely striking to the eye (this red creates an interesting contrast with the red, wax-like color of the apples later in the movie). This first shot melts into another long-distance, depressed angle shot replete with images of illegal architecture structures. Absolutely no words are needed and the living environment of the main character is already extremely clear. At the end of the film, the camera stills on a picture of the fortunate family short of the mute daughter (she has obviously been sent to America by the American Colonel). The whole family wears bright and tidy clothing, but their expressions are hard and stiff. The scene changes from color back to black and white, and other than creating a comparison with the first scene, this still also discloses the idea that behind the family's happy exterior lies bleakness and desolation.

### 3. *A City of Sadness*

In 1989, Hou Xiao-xian applied a historical perspective and concepts of human life to one of Taiwan's most taboo subjects, the 228 Incident, and completed the film, *A City of Sadness*. *A City of Sadness* uses overlapping metaphors conveyed by various levels of narrative viewpoints as well as multiple narrative threads, mixtures of different languages, and different sounds, to create a film symphony of an extremely complicated structure. Hou's courage in re-examining history as well as the precise and complex structure of the film earned it a Venice Golden Lion Award in 1989.

This film takes the fate of one family as its subject in order to suggest the history and tragedy of life during the early ROC period. Although this movie is not an adaptation of an earlier literary work, the scriptwriters were, in fact, two novelists from the time, Wu Nian-zhen and Zhu Tian-wen, and the movie is characterized by a high level of "literary-ness." Below, the author will chose some representational moments from the movie and explain how the film uses "sound," "off-camera narration," and "empty shots" to create an artistic effect:

1. When the film begins, the wife of Lin Wen-xiong, the eldest brother in the family, gives birth to a child. The woman's screaming unceasingly punctures and

disrupts the Japanese Emperor's message of unconditional surrender playing on the radio. This suggests that the "grand narrative" of the country and the "small narrative" of the personal as well as the "male narrative" and the "female narrative" are inextricably intertwined, while at the same time remaining at odds. After the 228 Incident, the massive gap between Chen Yi's broadcast announcement and Kuan Mei's (the female main character) diary is an example of a similar technique.

2. One of Hou Xiao-xian's strong points is his use of landscape shots to create a transitional moment for changes in time and space. He uses the expansion of imaginative space created by these long shots to sublimate emotion. For example, after the funeral is held for the eldest brother, Wen-xiong, the camera transitions to a shot of a bird in flight, and immediately after this we come to the scene of Wen-qing and Kuan-mei's wedding. Through the use of landscape shots as a transitional device, great sadness and great joy become only slight separations on the same narrative thread and this becomes a metaphor for Hou Xiao-xian's manner of viewing human life. Even further, running also through this series of three shots is "off camera narration"--both funeral music and wedding music blend together, sounding almost exactly the same. What emerges is a philosophy of life close to the poetic.

In conclusion, the rise of New Taiwan Cinema could not have taken place without the achievements of Taiwan literature and Taiwan literary figures. And the possession of "literary-ness" is one of the important elements which, after the intermingling of Taiwan Literature and Taiwan Film, allowed film in Taiwan to break into the Taiwan New Cinema era.