The Big Wheel of Taiwan Film History

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Taiwan Cinema Toolkit

DCP & Blu-ray Showcase, 2017

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The Big Wheel of Taiwan Film History: Six Classics of Taiwan Cinema

By TANG Pao-Chen

In the 2010 special issue of *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* devoted to the history of Taiwan cinema before the 1982 advent of New Cinema, the guest editor, Guo-Juin HONG, describes the existing English film scholarship on the subject as a “historiography of absence.” This is because Taiwan’s pre-1982 film history is nowhere to be found in world film history textbooks. David BORDWELL’s and Kristin THOMPSON’s widely read *Film History* is no exception. The history of Taiwan cinema familiar to the world begins with the heyday and legacy of New Cinema, leaving the impression that the movement alone represents the entirety of Taiwan’s cinematic achievements. This historiographical lack results in the fact that relations between New Cinema and previous generations of films and filmmakers, particularly those of the late 60s and the 70s, remain unclear and little explored.

While the main focus of HONG’s article lies in Anglo- and Euro-centrism and their take on Taiwan cinema, his valid ideological critique also points to a problem that takes up the most concrete and material form. The sheer unavailability to the general public of the majority of films before 1982 and the poor quality — low resolution, cropped frame, unidiomatic if not misleading subtitles — of those accessible titles curtail their reception and, consequently, the analysis of their aesthetic contribution. The “historiography of absence” is thus not only a product of geopolitics but also a direct outcome of the lack of primary materials.

To address this problem, Taiwan Film Institute has continued to preserve, restore, and promote pre-New Cinema films with historical significance. The six selections this year, in particular, speak head-on to this historiographical void. Such motivation is evident, as the rubric of “Classics of Taiwan Cinema” under which the six films are categorized makes clear. After all, what constitutes the formation of film history if not, at least preliminarily, the process of canon formation itself? The six films are *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan* (1959), *Goodbye, Taipei* (1969), *Four Moods* (1970), *Moon Fascinating, Bird Sweet* (1978), *The Wild Goose on the Wing* (1979), *The Wheel of Life* (1983).

Taking them in reverse order, the omnibus film *The Wheel of Life*, directed by King HU, LI Hsing, and PAI Ching-Jui, stood at a crucial historical juncture: the release of *In Our Time* (1982) and *The Sandwich Man* (1983), the two films — likewise co-directed — that declared the advent of New Wave. *The Wheel of Life* thematizes the motif of eternal recurrence by weaving together its three
parts across three historical eras through the Buddhist notion of reincarnation. Like New Cinema, the film also explores, especially in the third part directed by PAI Ching-Jui, the socio-cultural conditions of contemporary Taiwan through radical aesthetic means, bringing together experiments on the boundary between illusion and reality, ethnographic scenes of a shamanic ritual, and intermedial dialogue between cinema, traditional theater, and modern dance. Indeed, as SHEN Shiao-Ying points out, in his 1964 debut short A Morning in Taipei, PAI Ching-Jui — who received film training at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome — constantly played with thematic and stylistic elements that could well be described as the embodiment of the new wave spirit almost two decades before New Cinema came into the picture. As a vanguard of New Cinema, PAI Ching-Jul’s work not only prompts us to rethink the “beginning” of Taiwan’s New Wave movement, in terms of both its local and transcultural influences, but also to reevaluate the teleology implied in the New Wave narrative: Where does the newness begin? What makes the New Wave new?

PAI Ching-Jul’s case also invites us to re-examine the other auteurs of the 60s and 70s by exploring their own thematic concerns and aesthetic uniqueness. To that end, the other two parts of The Wheel of Life and the four-part omnibus film Four Moods (co-directed by PAI Ching-Jul, King HU, LI Hsing, and LI Han-Hsiang) serve as a convenient and fitting place to start. Viewed together or apart, these shorts present in a nutshell the characteristics of three other major filmmakers: King HU, LI Han-Hsiang, and LI Hsing. The two Lis are particularly worthy of note here — King HU, after all, needs no introduction.

LI Han-Hsiang, after parting with the Shaw Brothers Studio in Hong Kong, came to Taiwan and founded Grand Motion Picture in 1963. Although GMP closed in 1970 due to financial difficulties, the many filmmakers brought to Taiwan or trained by the company as well as the star system that it established significantly raised the artistic and technical bars of Taiwan’s film industry. The sea change that GMP brought about in the mid to late 1960s resulted in what film critic Peggy CHIAO has described as the “five years that changed history.” As a filmmaker, LI Han-Hsiang himself is most famous for his elaborate costume productions such as The Love Eterne (1963) and Beauty of Beauties (1965). The last part of Four Moods, “Happiness”, provides a glimpse of his expertise in this field.

As for LI Hsing, a familiar narrative today portrays him as the representative figure of the “propagandist” Healthy Realism films from 1963 onwards. But the trajectory of LI Hsing’s wide-ranging career dates further back and the established account of his Healthy Realist style must be modified once his earlier films are taken in account. This can be seen in his Taiwanese-dialect film, Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan. With a peculiar film style — one that combines features of early cinema (or, in Tom Gunning’s now paradigmatic account, “the cinema of attractions”) with those of classical narrative cinema — Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan not only complicates LI Hsing’s association with classical narrative but also serves as a segue into the direct address techniques of Taiwanese-dialect cinema.

The other Taiwanese-dialect film, Goodbye, Taipei (dir. HUI Fung-Chung) likewise demonstrates features of such stylistic melange. Standard narrative progression is weaved with the character’s direct address to the camera, musical or comedic performances unrelated to the narrative flow, and the promotion of the leading actor WEN Xia’s stardom. Indeed, the film is the tenth, final, and the only surviving episode of a film series titled Wen Xia’s Adventures. Additionally, a diverse lineup of musical performances punctuates the film, including The Beatles’ “Hey Jude,” Percy Sledge’s “When a Man Loves a Woman,” and several popular Japanese songs. Insofar as the two leading actors in LI Hsing’s film, Wang and Liu, are also modeled after the classical Hollywood comedy duo Laurel and Hardy, one finds, in the supposedly “local” Taiwanese-dialect cinema, the most transcultural articulations of film language and reference.

Finally, CHEN Yao-Chi’s Moon Fascinating, Bird Sweet and LUI Li-Li’s The Wild Goose on the Wing. Both adapted from Chiung-Yao’s novels, the two films belong to a cluster of Chiung-Yao films wildly popular in the 60s and 70s. These films share such common features as a predominately urban setting, middle-class characters (played frequently by the same group of stars, most famously the combo of “Two Chins and Two Lins”: CHARLIE CHIN and CHIN HAN; Brigitte LIN and Joan LIN), a love triangle, and melodramatic plotlines. While these “formulaic” elements group a large number of Chiung-Yao films as a specific subgenre of romantic melodrama, if not a unique mode of the Taiwanese melodramatic imagination, the two films showcase the potential inner complexities that filmmakers explored under the generic framework. Viewed together they form a great pair of contrasts. If Moon Fascinating, Bird Sweet (starring Brigitte LIN and Charlie CHIN) can be described as a more conventional Chiung-Yao film featuring a Jane-Eyre-like school teacher taming a wild girl while melting the heart of her aloof, arrogant, and alcoholic father along the way, in The Wild Goose on the Wing (starring Brigitte LIN, again, but this time paired with Charlie CHIN’s rival, CHIN HAN), one sees the structured narrative now come with additional layers, sub-plotlines, explorations of character psychology, and a dark twist involving an angel of vengeance.

Returning to where we started, The Wheel of Life, one observes in the second part directed by LI Hsing an instance of the ways in which the auteurs borrowed elements from the Chiung-Yao film for their own artistic expressions. In this case, LI Hsing relocates a contemporary romantic melodrama to a different temporal-spatial context of the early Republican era, which is then tightly linked to King HU’s Ming-dynasty period drama in the first part and PAI Ching-Jul’s depiction of contemporary Taiwan in the third. Like the overall arrangement of The Wheel of Life that, through editing, connects three different styles of filmmaking set in three distinct eras, the six classics of Taiwan cinema this year form a historiographical montage as well. They allow us to start teasing out the necessary interconnections for a renewed, more holistic grasp of Taiwanese film history.

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