



UNIVERSITI
TEKNOLOGI
MARA

Pusat
Penerbitan
Universiti (UPENA)

Jurnal SKRIN

VOLUME 5 • 2008 • ISSN 1823-1020

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Exploring 'Chinese' Art Film Aesthetic Influences on Independent Chinese Malaysian Filmmakers

Independent Chinese Malaysian films have been associated with the work of Tsai Ming Liang, Hou Hsiao Hsien, Wong Kar Wai and others. James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Ho Yuhang, Khoo Eng Yow, Woo Ming Jin and now Liew Seng Tat and Brando all favour focusing on the everyday life of marginal or working class characters, minimal dialogue and subtle storytelling. Lately, the films may be said to have more in common with the work of the 6th Generation mainland Chinese filmmakers who also shoot on digital. This paper seeks polemically to explore whether there is indeed such a 'Chinese film aesthetic,' tracing its influences through Italian social realism and other trends through film history to more current trends. Aside from favouring the works and styles of specific directors, are these filmmakers also influenced by the desires of film festival programmers and film curators looking for 'difference,' as well as the commodification of the art film market overseas? For example, Liew, who counts Stephen Chow (of Kungfu Hustle fame) among his favourite directors, for his debut feature Flower In The Pocket (2007), chooses an aesthetic quite opposed to that of Chow, one closer to home and to his Malaysian Independent Film (MIF) collaborators. What is going on? While the focus on the everyday and the mundane is realistic given the low-budgets they are working with, that still leaves aside the question of filmmaking style and aesthetics. How much of it is derivative of external influences, whether one is drawn to the style of art cinema, or one is rejecting classic Hollywood narrative styles? And how much of it is reflective of the filmmaker's personality, individual circumstance and habitus?

Introduction: “Chinese” Art Film Aesthetics?

I would first like to get a very large question out of the way. In conceiving the abstract of this paper, I decided that we need to examine more closely the constant comparison of the works of indie Chinese Malaysian filmmakers to better known art film auteurs like Hou Hsiao Hsien and Tsai Ming Liang. Is there a “Chinese” art film aesthetic that threads through many of the Chinese Malaysian independent films? First, let us hone in on the word “Chinese.” Actually, “Chinese” poetics refer specifically to Taiwan New Cinema, not mainland 5th Generation or even the so-called 6th generation. Also, when Taiwan New Cinema emerged in the early 1980s on the film festival circuit, initially the films were screened under a catch-all category: China/Hongkong/Taiwan, sometimes even when it came under ‘Taiwan’ it had ‘China’ tagged behind it (due to PRC intervention, Taiwanese films were not shown in the Hong Kong International Film Festival). Only through the efforts of Peggy Chiao was a new national cinema for Taiwan born on the international film festival circuit. So the term “Chinese art film aesthetic” is too broad in this case for reasons of geography, politics and also, style and content, and this is something I will return to later.

Style

In terms of style or technique, there is no denying the influence of Tsai Ming Liang on Malaysian independents and other aspiring East and Southeast Asian art film directors. Tsai created a kind of language that is, according to Brian Hu, “legible to the film festival crowd,” teaching us “how to read a certain brand of long takes, long shots, empty spaces, urban sounds, narrative minimalism and quirky sexuality” (2005). His influence is reflected in the works by his leading actor, Lee Kang-sheng, Korean director Kim Ki-Duk,¹ and James Lee. While this form of genealogising is common,² Hu reminds us that this tendency racialises the films by homogenising the diverse range of Asian art films with a stereotypical pan-Asianness. It makes the newer films easier to dismiss (see Hilo, 2007) without allowing for local specificities and political positioning (Hu, *ibid.*). Not only that, it downplays the influences of non-Asian filmmakers on Asian art films.

I would like to take up Hu’s point. Yes, indie Malaysian filmmakers like Ho, Woo Ming Jin and James Lee count among their favourite films,

those by Hou Hsiao Hsien, Edward Yang and Tsai Ming-liang. Yet Tsai himself admits his influences come from the European modernists of the 1960s and 1970s, Antonioni and Truffaut among others (interview with Shelly Kraicer, 2000). When asked by Kraicer if his films participate in a "Taiwanese Art Film Style" set by Hou Hsiao-hsien (using long takes, stationary camera, medium to long shots, and location shooting), Tsai denies the association, stating instead that his films are influenced by his own theatre work (Kraicer, p. 583). Incidentally, his films have been likened to Harold Pinter plays, and coincidentally, James Lee who also emerges from a theatrical background has directed a Pinter play on stage and his trilogy of films on love are takes on Pinter's play. Moreover, genealogising also means that any use of non-actors and emphasis on realism usually invokes comparisons with Italian neorealism (Wu, p. 78). Similarly, Malaysian indie filmmakers also are familiar with a diverse range of international films.

For example Ho Yuhang counts among his favourite films on his Facebook page *Scattered Clouds* (Mikio Naruse, 1967), *Au Hasard Balthazar* (Robert Bresson), *Unforgiven*, *Gun Crazy*, *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini), *Days of Being Wild* (WKW), *The Red Circle* (Melville, Gangster film), *Key Largo* (Huston, Bogey & BeCALL noir), *The Conformist*, *La Chienne* (1931 Renoir), Buster Keaton, Mizoguchi, Ozu, *Close-Up* (Kiarostami), Fritz Lang, Chaplin, *Shoot the Piano Player* (Truffaut), *A Brighter Summer Day* (1992 Edward Yang), *Summer at Grandpa's* (Hou Hsiao Hsien). Ho also writes that he likes well-written stories, feeling, subtlety of expression. On the other hand, some of Woo Ming Jin's favourite films on Facebook are *The Turning Gate* (Sang-Soo Hong who is labeled a "Tsai Ming-liang ripoff" on imdb.com!), *The Man without a Past* (Aki Kaurismaki), *Woman is the Future of Man* (Sang-Soo Hong), *The River* (Tsai Ming-liang), *Yi Yi* (Edward Yang), *Colossal Youth* (Pedro Costas, 2006). Woo's favourites point to specific ways of cinematic storytelling, stylistics and content that the filmmakers emulate: little to no dialogue; emphasis on visual storytelling (a characteristic of Hubert Bals' funded projects, and evidenced in *Rain Dogs* and *The Elephant and the Sea*), long takes, non-actors, and a focus on everyday life.

There are important reasons behind the rise of Taiwan New Cinema: its opposition to the authoritarian martial law (1947-87) and "to state power and the concentration of cultural production" (Davis, p. 4). It was also able to flourish in a time of increasing democratization in Taiwan. According to Chia-chi Wu:

Taiwan New Cinema started out as political and cultural rebellion in the domestic context, got re-inscribed as an anticolonial cinema against Japanese, Chinese, or American imperialism on the international stage (but distinct from the category of 'Third Cinema'), and ended up transforming itself into a supplier of international art cinema. (p. 88)

Thus there are very culturally and politically specific reasons for the beginnings of such a cinema movement. Notably, land reform, rapid industrialization with the economic and political support of the USA and multinational investments made Taiwan during the 1970s and 1980s the fastest growing economy in the world and brought radical socio-cultural transformations in lifestyles, social relations and value systems (Lu 11). Confronted by modernity, Taiwan New Cinema directors reacted in their own ways: Hou, the mainland Chinese who grew up in Taiwan in his search for Taiwanese ethnic/national identity through nostalgia for the past, "traces disappearing traditional cultures mostly located in rural areas" (Lu, p. 19). For Edward Yang, Taiwanese modernity results in urban and social alienation where characters are lonely, and the city is a place where the worship of money takes precedence over traditional familial ties and filial piety, and people are perceived to be fake or constantly performing (even when they are not). Women in Yang's vision adapt better than men to modernity but are also negatively represented – the Eurasian murderess in *The Terrorizers* (see Lu, p. 19). In the case of independent Malaysian cinema, this negative idea of modernity, consumption, gender and technology is best exemplified by James Lee's *Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004).

As for the modernist Tsai, his very sad, almost plotless films which offer a "slice-of-life", broken with some comic relief (Kraicer, p. 583) to capture banal everyday life suggest a modernity where communication is impossible despite civility and technological advancement and where the human is reduced to the qualities of an animal. For example his films capture quotidian "scenes of intimate cleaning, defecation, masturbation, grief, drinking, eating, telephone calls, ironing, coitus, etc." (Rehm, p. 27). Much of this everyday action revolves around the body which can fall apart, lose control, or be disgraced (Chan, p. 6; see also Joyard, p. 71, 74).

Now I would like to turn our focus to the specific style/formal techniques of each director, Hou and Tsai respectively. That which constitute Hou's poetics include (Norne and Yeh, online 1994):

- The use of static, extremely long takes
- Measured, rhythmic use of ellipsis
- Minimal use of tracks, pans, intra shot reframing
- Temporally unmarked transitional spaces
- Tendency toward tableaux-like long-shots/few close ups
- The geometricization of space
- Delimitation of the frame
- Locking the camera/spectator into a single axis
- Rare, strategic use of the shot/reverse shot figure
- Gradual revelation and construction of spatial relationships
- Repetition

All these connect (framing, for example, in *City of Sadness* is used to emphasize routine, domesticity, and control) to give a sense of oblique narrative – this relies on composition, mise en scène (setting, scene building, acting), and camera movement (static shot and the long take).

Tsai's style is however is characterized by: "long takes, long shots, empty spaces, urban sounds, narrative minimalism and quirky sexuality" (Hu); and "static camera, minimal dialogue and music, disaffected and almost mute male lead, obsessions with sexual longing and dissatisfaction, tension between an ascetic style and narrative unpredictability" (Andrew Chan of Woo Ming Jin's *Elephant and the Sea* having Tsai trademarks, p. 8).

Interestingly among the list of Asian films that James Udden points out are influenced by Hou's pan-East Asian minimalism (static long take) are not only Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi* (1995) Korean director Hong Sang-soo, and mainland Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2001) but also Tsai Ming-liang (p. 194).

The Particular: Local Specificities and Political Positioning

Formal influences

Having acknowledged that Hou and Tsai (as well as the European avant garde) conceived a set of aesthetic devices (or poetics) that are tremendously influential on a younger generation of filmmakers in Asia, let's look at the specific impact these have on indie Chinese Malaysian films. Overall, I think that a **close analysis of each film** would have

to be made before any conclusion can be derived about the particular art film aesthetics adopted by individual indie filmmakers. This is because the Malaysian Independent Filmmakers (MIF) is still a new movement; some of its young directors have only a handful of short films and one feature under their belt (Tan Chui Mui, and Liew Seng Tat), while other more feature-prolific directors (like Ho Yuhang and Woo Ming Jin) are still experimenting, defining and refining their personal styles. Thus, since they are evolving in style, to label a filmmaker as Tsai wannabe is perhaps shortsighted and rigid; it imposes a pan-Asian homogenous framework of art film aesthetics that frees the film from its specific geographical and historical meanings. Labelling depoliticizes both the reasons for the emergence of Taiwan New Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s and the specific context and significance of indie filmmaking in Malaysia post-2000. In addition, while their films focus on visual storytelling, with minimal dialogue, low-keyed acting (or non-acting), little use of music and a reliance on ambient sound, it is more difficult to generalize that long static takes are signature traits (over time) for any of the filmmakers. For example, Ho's third feature *Rain Dogs* (which had the highest budget and number of locations compared to his two previous films) has fewer long takes (except for the final scene of the rainbow) and the camera is also less static. One should study closely an auteur's whole body of work before confirming the kinds of art film aesthetics they incorporate as part of their own over time. James Lee's first feature *Snipers* which uses three interconnected vignettes about a sniper's gun may be influenced by the story structure of WKW's *Chungking Express*, but generally critics do not associate his style with Wong. In her later analysis of *Flowers of Shanghai*, Yeh (2001) too suggests that even Hou's world of poetics "keeps expanding its parameters," meaning that he tried newer techniques to convey his poetics (p. 74). Yeh has been careful to explain that Hou's formal aesthetics are in the interests of elucidating his "mythos," the recurring themes in his work (Yeh, 2001, p. 71).

So how do the formal aesthetics support the recurring themes of the individual Malaysian indie director?

Influences on Content: Capturing Everyday Life

The focus on quotidian life, proffered by both Hou and Tsai, is strongly evident in films by James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Woo Ming Jin, Tan Chui Mui and Liew Seng Tat. Chinese Malaysian independent filmmakers portray

the everyday life of marginal, working class characters, using minimal dialogue and subtle storytelling.

They are not alone in capturing quotidian life and offering a critique of modern everyday life. Digital works from China in recent years like *Platform*, *Still Life*, *Blind Shaft* banned in their own country for exposing the negative effects of capitalism on everyday life but garnering awards overseas suggest a proclivity on the part of film festivals for an aesthetic of the everyday. Thus one wonders whether these filmmakers are also influenced by the commodification of the global art film market or the desires of festival programmers, curators and audiences looking for the pseudo-individualised Asian art film that still falls within the standardised paradigm of “different but the same?”

As the rising Asian national cinema in foreign film festivals in the last few years, digital Malaysian indies have succeeded in putting Malaysia on the film festival map since U-Wei Haji Saari's *The Arsonist* made it to Cannes in 1995. Suffice it to say the MIF's international visibility as a group representing “The Colours of Malaysia” (2007 Pusan International Film Festival catalogue) is significant not only for raising the level of film as art in the country, but perhaps more pointedly from the point of racial politics. Due to the National Cultural Policy which calls for assimilation to native Malay culture, ethnic minority Malaysian players have been sidelined from the mainstream film industry since the 1970s – unless they are commercial film producers like David Teoh of Metrowealth. The racial dimension even while downplayed in the interests of focusing instead on human cosmopolitanism cannot be unhinged from larger questions related to the socio-cultural and economic transformations Malaysia has undergone over the past thirty years or more under the National Economic Policy (NEP) and the varying names by which it gets called today. While reasons for the emergence of indie filmmaking have to do with technological advancements, structural and socio-political reasons set the context for the rise of the indies. But the content of their films is equally important to analyse. Why the everyday?

Preliminary Hypothesis on Indie Representations of Everyday Life in Malaysia³

First, quotidian subjects are understandable and realistic given the limited budgets indie filmmakers have. There need not be special effects, stunts, built expensive sets, etc. Most of these films are set in contemporary

times, foregoing the necessity of building historical sets, expensive costuming and period detail.

Secondly, like New Taiwan Cinema directors, indie Malaysian Chinese filmmakers draw attention to the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Malaysia in the 1990s and present. Malaysia too underwent rapid economic growth over a span of 20 years into the 1990s. Before the financial crisis in 1997, the annual GDP during the 1990s was between 7 and 8%.

Television dramas and mainstream films of the 1990s mostly focused on the lives of the new Malay middle classes and elites (beneficiaries of the NEP) while simultaneously catering to the Malay masses. Indie films however focus on the darker side of modernity, showing those who have not benefited from the economic success of the NEP years, questioning development, and suggesting that the drive towards consumption is irrational.

Most Malaysian indie filmmakers claim not to have a political agenda, stating that they merely want to tell stories. These films are personal stories of familial and romantic relationships. Yet in their particular low-keyed focus on everyday modernity in Malaysia, they illustrate everydayness as marked by boredom (*Room To Let*, 2002), alienation, routine (*Sanctuary*, 2004) as well as mystery and quirky humour. Some have clearer political goals than others: Khoo Eng Yow's *The Bird House* (2006) pits economic development against heritage conservation efforts between two brothers.

I read these cinematic representations of everydayness as possible sites of resistance and struggle (against who and what?), while also wondering if they merely portray everydayness as conforming to and playing out dominant ideologies. Some of these films offer a critique of everyday life, particularly highlighting the social alienation in urban capitalist modernity (*Beautiful Washing Machine*) and the unevenness of economic development which are tied to racial policies that affect marginalised communities (the Tamil community in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur in *Chalanggai*). Through representations of everyday acts like smoking and eating, I argue that James Lee's films hint of the fundamental alienation of the psychoanalytical subject who, as workers alienated from their product of labour in capitalism, can never be satisfied or achieve complete happiness (Khoo, forthcoming).

Of course the question of whose everyday life is being represented and why in terms of class, gender, age and ethnicity (including language and religion) is of utmost relevance. These fictional films focus on petty

gangsters, prostitutes, food vendors, the unemployed, who trudge on in life with "cruel optimism" (Berlant) that it is possible to climb the ladder of success despite the pro-elite Malay policies and corruption that work against them. The predominant focus on working-class ethnic Chinese and Indian characters challenges ethnic stereotypes and provides complexity beyond racialised representations. For example, Tan Chui Mui's short film *There Is Treasure Everywhere* (2000) is the story of a karung guni man, a Malaysian modern version of Benjamin's rag picker, who looks for scrap metal, old furniture etc. to sell. Ben Highmore (2002) elaborates on Benjamin's trash aesthetic:

The ragpicker deals in the second-hand, in the dreams of the past for a future that was never realized. The modern-day ragpicker treads a fine line between a sentimental attitude towards the past and a revolutionary nostalgia for the future. When the latter takes precedence over the former, the ragpicker's radical task becomes one of cataloguing the broken promises that have been abandoned in the everyday trash of history. (p. 65)

While the tone of the film is an upbeat one – it is narrated by an Indian boy in English through (animated) drawings of his father whom he imagines as a captain of a ship going to look for treasure – the film also derives pathos from its viewers who catch glimpses of reality through the video footage interspersed with the drawings. This story of an Indian *karung guni* man, a young father collecting the scraps of capitalism to support his family, can be read as a reminder about the state of economic marginalization of Indian Malaysians under the NEP. The motif of the ragpicker shows up again in a scene in *Liew's Flower in the Pocket* (2007) when the father of the boys goes to a dumping ground to abandon the puppy.

Woo Ming Jin's *The Elephant and the Sea* (2007) hints of the darker consequences of modernity on the environment when dead and poisoned fish wash ashore and a strange epidemic (possibly bird flu) has killed the wife of a fisherman and wiped out his chickens. The effects of outmigration to the big city for work and the unevenness of modernity in small coastal towns means unemployment for youths left behind or involvement in petty criminal activity and small scam jobs, mostly performed on motorists (presumably outsiders on the main highway passing through). Woo makes use of repetition (of composed shots, of events) to capture the routine of his two protagonists. The everyday is tedious but nevertheless, Yun Ding hopes that luck is just around the

corner and may bring surprises (which it does when he wins the lotto). For this coastal town which relies on fishing, it is nature whose power to provide is suppressed and thwarted by humans' degradation of the environment. However, the appearances of a flowerhorn fish, an iguana, elephant, chick and water imagery finally redeem the lives of its characters (acting either as natural resources to be exploited/poached, to offer luck, or as signifiers of Nature's mysterious wonder and spiritual reward). Living in poverty, Yun Ding has little room for sentimentality whether for his dead friend's valuables (mobile phone and camera) or for the wildlife he captures for sale. And modernity, manifesting in the form of the mobile phone and camera, is only good for pawning for cash to survive, doing little to improve the owner's quality of life.

Lastly, the specific ways these films represent everydayness is important: they eschew fast paced cross-cutting for long takes and still shots, and favour gritty realism and natural lighting to convey the banality of the everyday as oppositional tactics to mainstream film values. In this, they share a global modernist aesthetic with other low budget indie filmmakers. In conclusion, like Hou's formal choices supporting his poetics and themes, the long take, still shots and the use of repetition that fall under the category of art film aesthetics are deployed (in this case by Woo) because they convey the rhythm of everyday life in small town Malaysia in the most effective and affective ways.

Notes

- ¹ Brian Hu explains that film critic Tony Rayns panned Kim's *3-Iron* as a copy of Tsai's *Vive L'Amour* (1994).
- ² For example, claims that Hou Hsiao Hsien is a descendent of Mizoguchi or Ozu, or Lou Ye's *SuZhou River* being very Wong Kar Wai.
- ³ My focus on the representations of everyday life in indie films is the basis of a broader project covering not just the works of Chinese Malaysian filmmakers but also films by Amir Muhammad, Yasmin Ahmad, Deepak K. Menon.

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