

Interview with Hsu Hsiao-ming, director of Homesick Eyes

David Walsh
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I first asked Hsu Hsiao-ming why he had chosen to make a film about foreign workers in Taiwan. Hsu explained that these workers had only started arriving in the country three or four years ago. "I didn't sense suddenly," he went on, "that there were many people around us who didn't look Chinese. But gradually I began to notice Filipino babysitters pushing strollers and also I began to notice the workers on the construction sites. Suddenly we had many foreign workers and I began to take an interest in their lives."

One of Hsu's previous films was *Heartbreak Island*. I asked him why loneliness was such a prominent issue in Taiwanese films. He said: "I think it starts from the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan. Because of the political situation, people still feel very insecure. When human beings are in that insecure environment they tend to distrust other people. So therefore this leads to loneliness in the society."

In response to my comment about the extraordinary ability of Taiwanese film to combine poetry and realism, Hsu noted that he had researched his film for nearly six months. He continued: "There was one point at which I almost abandoned this project. I was trying to interview Thai workers and Filipinos and I found that they kept to themselves, I couldn't enter into their situation. It wasn't hostility, but there was a line between us. I was thinking that if I couldn't cross over that line I couldn't do this film."

"I picked several locations. One was the airport construction site. In the very beginning, especially at the airport site, the workers kept their distance. So one day I was watching them eating in the canteen and I looked very depressed; I had been doing this work for half a year and I was getting nowhere. Suddenly a young worker walked up to me and asked me in Mandarin Chinese, 'Do you have a problem?'" Hsu

laughed at the irony of the situation.

"I wasn't sure what this gesture meant. So I said, no, there's nothing wrong. But he offered to help, saying, 'If you need help, please come to me.' He was someone who could communicate with the other workers [because he spoke Chinese]. He was from Thailand.

"And from that point on I began to penetrate more or less into their lives. I began to understand their situation, so I felt very strongly for them. When I was shooting I felt that my heart was with them. When I was editing, my heart, my feeling for them showed up. It's a simple film. It's the way I felt."

I asked Hsu what, in his opinion were the strengths and weaknesses of Taiwan cinema.

"This is a complicated question," he replied. "Even though in Taiwan at this moment people feel very insecure, there is still a great deal of vitality. Everyone wants to do something. Unfortunately, for the film workers the opportunities are not very good. Everyone has to spend one or two years just to come up with a work. Creativity and vitality are the strengths of Taiwanese films at this moment. The weakness is that the society and the government do not identify with this vital creativity. The society is rich, but as far as the filmmakers go, it does not identify with them. The society and the government don't recognize that the filmmakers need help."



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