The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival-third in a series of article by David Walsh

Films from Taiwan and China

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This seems to me a legitimate question: is the fact that one is so astonished by the best films from Taiwan a tribute to the remarkable advances in filmmaking made in that country, or does it simply underscore the general weakness of cinema in much of the rest of the world? Put another way: is the strength of the Taiwanese films merely a relative phenomenon, or does it contain an absolute element? I don't know if it's possible to answer this in any precise way, but I suspect that both factors come into play.

The best Taiwanese directors deserve full credit for making significant advances. Yet the qualities of their films—aesthetic seriousness, pictorial beauty, emotional exactness and complexity, social critique, compassion—ought not, in principle, to be out of the reach of directors in other countries. In other words, the development in Taiwan seems to me the more natural one and filmmaking there more of what one would expect to see on the eve of the new century, when contrasted to the sort of confused, cold and self-absorbed work one encounters so often from North America, Europe and Japan. This suggests to me at least that the problems in the economically advanced countries are primarily of an ideological and perspectives character.

Darkness and Light is another beautiful film from Taiwan. It is directed by Chang Tso-Chi, born in 1961, a graduate of the Film and Drama Department of Chinese Culture University and a former assistant to Hou Hsiao-hsien on *A City of Sadness* (1989). He has made two previous feature films, *Gunshots in the Dark* (1994) and *Ah-Chung* (1996).

The new film is set in Keelung, a port city on the north coast of Taiwan, "a town," according to the film's publicity, "not much marked by the economic boom of the 1980s but hit quite hard by the recession of the late 1990s." Kang-Yi is a 17-year-old girl, home for summer vacation from college in Taipei. Her father, who lost his wife and his eyesight in a car accident, makes ends meet by running a small massage parlor in his home, with his second wife, also blind. Kang-Yi has a slightly retarded brother. She's a lively girl, although there is not a great deal of comfort and pleasure in the family's life, aside from large communal meals.

A boy of more or less her own age, Ah Ping, comes into Kang-Yi's life. His father has returned to China and entrusted the boy to a friend, Song, from his army days. Ah Ping has been expelled from a military academy. Song, he discovers, is a smalltime gangster, who also provided the money to set up the massage parlor. Ah Ping runs afoul of a local corrupt and brutal policeman. Kang-Yi develops a crush on him; they spend one night strolling through a market, standing on a bridge and, at dawn, take a boat ride around the harbor. This is the only real time they spend with each other, as it turns out.

As the two climb the stairs of their apartment building after their boat ride, they pause. Then a brief, but extraordinary sequence in three distinct movements: Kang-Yi gives Ah Ping a kiss on the cheek. He grabs her and pushes his mouth against hers; a little startled, she doesn't respond, staring at him with open eyes. He pulls away; she lunges for him and kisses him passionately.

Unhappily, Kang-Yi's former classmate Ah Lim considers himself her boyfriend and happens to be the son of one of Song's rivals. Trouble begins between the gang members. The policeman presides over a meeting of the gangs' youthful members, but walks out suddenly, obviously encouraging the youths to fight it out. Ah Ping is killed in the ensuing brawl. Meanwhile, Kang-Yi's father, who has been ill for some time, also dies. The girl suffers two severe blows, one after the other. Time passes. During a fireworks display, while looking out at the harbor, Kang-Yi imagines her father and Ah Ping coming back, as if they'd been on a trip for a week or two. She teasingly greets Ah Ping. He asks, "Did you miss me?" "Just a bit," she replies. Everyone walks down the long corridor toward the dining room. It's a devastating moment.

Many directors around the world would like to make films of such simplicity and richness. Most can't because they don't have the ingredient without which all the technical skill means nothing, an elementary sympathy and interest in the lives of such people. There are plenty of films about working class figures made in France, Germany, the US and elsewhere, but most are opportunist, exploitive. The directors either sneer at their characters and situations or make use of them as a means of getting at something else, usually something about their own tedious and inconsequential lives.

Darkness and Light, on the other hand, pays attention to Kang-Yi and Ah Ping and their friends and family. Precisely because of the utter seriousness with which the film treats the fleeting, the banal, the details of everyday life, it passes through them and comes out the other side, so to speak, as something universal.

The film talks about matters that are so essential one is almost embarrassed to mention them. Life is difficult. There is extraordinary goodness in the world and extraordinary corruption. People are under great economic and psychological pressure. They are largely blind to their own needs. In spite of all the problems, people try to make contact with each other. The society weighs down on them, crippling some, disappointing others. But they continue to dream about happiness and that dream is pure and untainted. Someone else who saw *Darkness and Light* in Toronto commented to me, "This film is so human, it almost drives you crazy every time you think about it."

As part of its tribute to David Overbey, a long-time figure at the Toronto film festival, organizers screened a number of the films he championed over the years, including Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Dust in the Wind* (1986). Hou, born in China in 1947 and a pioneer of the new Taiwanese cinema, is one of the world's greatest filmmakers. It is a disgrace of the North American film industry, one of many, that not one of his works has ever been commercially distributed here.

In *Dust in the Wind*, Wan, a young man from the countryside, goes to Taipei to find work When he tells his father, a coal miner, that he wants to quit school, the older man replies, "If you want to be a cow, there's always

a plow.” In the city he goes through various jobs. For a while he works in a small print shop for a married couple. They are basically decent people, who worry about every penny though and never take their nose from the grindstone. Wan's girlfriend, Huen, also moves to Taipei, finding work in a dressmaker's shop. She finds it difficult to adjust and cries a lot. In time she loses some of her country ways, learning to drink beer and enjoy herself a little.

At one point, Wan borrows a motorcycle he uses for work to go shopping with Huen. Loaded down with gifts for their families, they discover the motorcycle has been stolen. Wan's response is to steal someone else's. When Huen objects, he says, “They don't care if we die, why do we care?” At home, Wan's father and his coworkers are drinking and talking about a strike. The miners' representative “is one of them,” complains one man.

Eventually, Wan goes into the army. The two correspond regularly for months. Huen writes: 387 days until you're discharged. Then she stops writing, although Wan is still saving himself for her. His letters to her are returned. Eventually, he learns the truth from his family: Huen has married a postman. It's fate, a letter tells him; but also the postman had more “stature.” He weeps on his bed. Discharged from the army, Wan returns to his family's home in the country. No one is there to greet him except his grandfather, digging in the garden. In the distance, between the steep hills, one can see the pearl-colored ocean, and the sky and clouds above it.

A remarkable film, about people with all the odds stacked against them. There is something terrible about a society which makes its young people so sad and tries to beat the humanity out of them. Hou and his screenwriters never strain, never pull at the heartstrings. They bring out what is important and allow the spectator to make up his or her own mind.

Two other Taiwanese films screened at the Toronto film festival were less successful. *The Personals* by Chen Kuo-fu (*The Peony Pavilion*, 1995) is a smirking look at a female ophthalmologist who quits her job and goes to work full-time looking for a husband. The central character's and the filmmaker's feelings of superiority toward her prospective suitors were irritating and alienating. *March of Happiness* is the latest work by Lin Cheng-sheng. His *Murmur of Youth* (1997) was a sensitive film about two girls, with a somewhat contrived ending. *Sweet Degeneration* (1998), about incest, was contrived from beginning to end. Lin has campaigned for an end to the interest in society and history in Taiwanese cinema and a turn to films about individuals and their emotional relations. Why should films exclusively treat one or the other? If *March of Happiness* faithfully follows the director's recipe, then it is a poor one.

The situation for filmmakers in China must be very difficult, perhaps even more difficult for the successful ones. Less and less is heard from the so-called “Fifth Generation” of graduates from the Beijing film academy—Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Chen Kaige and others. In some cases, unfortunately, even when their films are larger and grander, less and less is heard from them. Chen (*Yellow Earth*, 1984; *Farewell My Concubine*, 1993) has made an epic about Ying Zheng, a provincial ruler in the third century BC who strove mightily and bloodily to be the first emperor of a unified China. *The Emperor and the Assassin* stars Gong Li and a cast of thousands. The film is carefully made and many interesting and exotic things go on. It is worth seeing for its historical sweep, but this kind of impersonal, gigantic and nationally-conscious epic leaves me a little cold.

Crazy English by Zhang Yuan (*East Palace, West Palace*; 1996) is a documentary about Li Yang, a Chinese go-getter who has carved out a little business empire for himself teaching the rudiments of English to groups of thousands of students at once. Li, essentially a motivational speaker, encourages his listeners to be self-confident and aggressive. “Study English well to promote world peace!” he shouts. “What is the most concrete way to love your country? To make yourself qualified for the twenty-first century, to make yourself strong mentally and physically, to make more money internationally—that's the way to love your country.”

He leads his students in supposedly cathartic chants such as: “I enjoy losing face! I enjoy making money!” A self-made man, Li tells a group in Harbin, “Money is the biggest motivation for studying.” He preaches pragmatism, conformism and nationalism, citing General Colin Powell in front of one crowd to the effect that the “only touching story” is the one about “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps.” With a group of soldiers atop the Great Wall he chants, in English: “Never let your country down! Never let your parents down! Never let yourself down! The PLA [People's Liberation Army] is great!”

The emergence of such a repugnant social type (although Li is personally likable), whose activities are obviously encouraged by the Beijing regime, reveals a good deal about modern-day China. The film, however, chooses to repeat his performance, which is virtually identical wherever he goes, over and over. Li is simply not that interesting. *Crazy English* should either be one-third its present length or spend some of its time making sense of its subject and the circumstances that have produced him.

Wang Xiaoshuai belongs to the so-called “Sixth Generation” of Chinese filmmakers. Born in Shanghai in 1966, he graduated from the film academy in 1989. He shot his first feature film, *The Days*, about artists in Stalinist China in 1993, and his second, *Frozen*, in 1997. Wang made *So Close to Paradise* in 1995, but the film was held up by censorship for three years. It is one of the most interesting Chinese films I've seen in recent years, along with He Jianjun's *Postman* (1995) and Jia Zhang Ke's *Xiao Wu* (1997).

The film concerns itself with two men who come from the countryside to look for work in the provincial city of Wuhan. Gao Ping, whom we first see involved in an attempted scam that goes sour, has taken the road of trying to get rich through crime. Dongzi, his young friend, works as a “shoulder pole,” carrying items for people for a few coins each job. Gao Ping, in his attempt to find information about a man who has cheated him, meets up with and kidnaps a Vietnamese singer and bar girl, Ruan Hong.

Despite this unpromising beginning to their relationship, Gao Ping and the girl hit it off. When he finds out that she is the girlfriend of a vicious local crime boss, however, he panics. It's too late. The boss exacts his revenge. Dongzi is a quiet kid from the country who watches most of this from the sidelines; but he has his own feelings for Ruan Hong. In the end, after disaster has befallen Gao Ping, he has the opportunity to express them to the girl.

Whatever moral one may draw from the film, its picture of everyday life in China is pretty devastating. Gao Ping and Dongzi live in a shack. Poverty, crime, backwardness are rampant. A voice-over at one point says: “The money belonged to the boss. Ruan Hong belonged to the boss. The city ... belonged to the boss.” Gao Ping and Dongzi have a hard time getting by, but other layers of society are doing better. In a restaurant where Dongzi and the Vietnamese girl meet, someone enters the room with a birthday cake, singing “Happy Birthday to you!” and walking directly toward Ruan Hong. She smiles, thinking for an instant that the cake and the song are for her. No such luck. They're for a table full of well-heeled Chinese teenagers. Her face falls.

It was the gloomy portrayal of life in China that evidently made the government censors so unhappy. In a conversation, Wang Xiaoshuai explained that the film took three years to emerge from their hands because it was “not so happy, the whole atmosphere of the film was not so happy.” Wang said he wanted to make a film “about laborers from the countryside coming to the city. How they survive, their emotions, their feelings. They're young men, they have sexual desires.” He went on, ironically or otherwise, “I thought the government would like it, people working, making something of themselves.”

“Wuhan is on the Yangtze. People work as ‘shoulder poles' and carry

things to your home, for example. Or on construction jobs. They want to escape from the fields." Is there any protest about the conditions? I asked. He replied, a little bitterly, "The Chinese people are easy to control at this point. Anyway, they have no way to rebel, no way to complain, no outlet."

In regard to Ruan Hong, Wang commented, "Prostitution is a sensitive question. Officially, there is no such thing."

Returning to the question of those who come from the country to the city to earn a living, he observed, "There are two types. They go to work carrying things, but the impatient ones go into crime. The reality of the city disappoints them. They steal, they do other bad things. The crime rate is on the rise. These are the ones who want to get rich quick. If you get a construction job, for example, the agent who gets you the job may pay you 10 percent or less."

Wang spoke of the "sadness" of the people he made his film about. "There's not much talking, they don't communicate. Do they have any hope? There's only the money, a few dollars a day."

I asked him his views on the relationship between art and reality. "I try really hard to show real life," he said. "I don't like acting very much, or anything grand or artificial. I like to capture real feelings."

The director used nonprofessionals in his film. He first spotted the young man, Shi Yu, who plays Dongzi, working at a theater school. "With him, the first take was the best."

Why did he make films, I asked? "I used to be a painter. I wasn't a good painter. When I found that out I had no idea what to do. I was studying art. I asked myself, why do I like it? It shows me something about life. I want the whole canvas to move. This is what happens in a film."

About other filmmakers, he explained: "There are many I admire. When I began, the Chinese films of the 1930s and 1940s were important to me. You find you have the same feelings. Also Japanese and Taiwanese films. The films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, for example. I feel closer to the Taiwanese films than the Chinese. The atmosphere, the dialog are closer to the real Chinese. Chinese films present a fake reality.

"There are not many films from China I like. The problem in China is that you are told, 'You can't do this, you can't do that.' You waste your time for three years, for example. So people begin to avoid the problem. People censor themselves. There is self-censorship. I want to find good stories, that's all."

The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival: First in a series of articles by David Walsh
[24 September 1999]
A dry bone in a stream:
The Wind Will Carry Us, written and directed by Abbas Kiarostami, based on an idea by Mahmoud Ayedin
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