

History and sadness: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*

David Walsh
12 August 2000

This review first appeared in Cinema Scope magazine

“It is not so much ‘facts’ that history as such disseminates but symbols of spiritual realities.”

— André Breton, 1949

In Hou Hsiao-hsien's remarkable *Good Men, Good Women*, an unhappy actress in contemporary Taipei, Liang Ching, receives entries taken from her stolen diary over her fax machine. They remind her of her dead lover — a petty criminal, Ah Wei, shot and killed several years earlier — and the fact that she took three million in “blood money” from his murderers as a settlement. On the phone, at one point, she tells the anonymous individual sending the faxed passages, “Everyone said: the dead stay dead, but money's real.”

If an artist could send pages of social history to contemporary audiences with the aim of reminding them of past traumas and their bearing on the present, how would he go about it? We don't have to sit around and speculate. Hou has accomplished it in *Good Men, Good Women*.

One of the pressing issues of our day is the need to read emotional life historically. That is to say, to put it bluntly, how do we account for the extraordinary unhappiness, confusion, and sense that something is absent from life afflicting great numbers of people (leaving aside, of course, those who are feeding at the stock market trough or its overflow, and whose existence is its own punishment)? Each individual attributes his or her own state of mind to personal factors, all of which may be real and legitimate. But surely if the condition is so generalized, it suggests a broader process at work. It occurs to almost no one — least of all in North America — to look to history as the source at least in part of his or her difficulties. Is there a generalized social psychology and can its historical trajectory be traced?

Hou, it seems to me, is one of the few contemporary artists who has considered this problem. *Good Men, Good Women* can be interpreted in a number of ways, as a modernist love story, a Taiwanese melodrama, a crime drama, an historical puzzle that needs to be pieced together. Through and beyond all that, it's a meditation on history and sadness. Hou locates the historical trauma, and it would be a good place for any of us to begin, in the post-World War II era. Liang Ching (Annie Shizuka Inoh) is acting in a film about Chiang Bi-yu (also Inoh) and Chung Hao-tung (Lim Giong), a Taiwanese couple who went off to fight in the anti-Japanese resistance on the Chinese mainland in 1940. Upon returning to Taiwan after the war, they helped establish a left-wing group that published a magazine called *The Enlightenment* for the purposes of “educating the masses.” They fell under the heel of political repression. Chung Hao-tung, along with many other socialists and opponents of the Chiang Kai-shek regime,

was executed and Chiang Bi-yu widowed.

The Taiwanese of the 1990s are haunted, albeit unconsciously, by this past. Hou stresses the parallels between the two periods and the two women. He has said his theme was to show what remains constant, “the true color and energies of men and women.” Both Chiang Bi-yu and Liang want children and are unable to have or keep them; both women are in love with “outlaws” who meet early and violent deaths; and both mourn and grieve for these absent lovers.

It seems impossible, however, for a spectator not to be struck forcefully by the *differences* in their lives and times. Chiang Bi-yu dedicated her life, no matter how naively, to the ideals of social equality and justice. Liang's life has no such purpose, but Hou doesn't moralize. Her wretchedness is palpable, and it can't be attributed solely to her sadness at Ah Wei's death. She leads a largely cold, empty life, hanging around with small-time gangsters and drinking till she passes out. Whereas Chiang Bi-yu turns to her sister for support at the time of her arrest, Liang and her sister squabble over the former's supposed attentiveness to the latter's husband.

In the 1990s everything seems petty. The pursuit of money has replaced social idealism. In one of those scenes that only Hou and perhaps one or two other Taiwanese directors can stage and shoot — in which complex social relationships are brought out and dramatized in the most apparently effortless manner, as if such exposures were the most natural thing in the world — we see the intimate ties between gangsters and politicians, working out some filthy deal over a waste disposal plant. It's a thoroughly corrupt environment. The only thing Liang can do to try and make her situation more tolerable is remember Ah Wei and sing about her broken heart: “All around I see gilded lives, but mine is tarnished. All around I hear words like jade, but mine are luckless.”

The most exquisite and painful scenes are Liang's memories of her affair with Ah Wei (Jack Kao). It's truly terrible: their yearning, their helplessness, and how they connect intimately and how — at the same moments — they remain entirely apart from one another. In one scene, the pair sits on the floor in front of a mirror propped up against a wall. At first we see only Liang putting on make-up and her reflection in the glass. (A woman applying make-up is a fascinating sociological and sensual phenomenon.) The two discuss the possibility she's pregnant. It's the kind of dialogue that no one, or practically no one, in the US or Europe can write these days: the universal, the “sacred,” in the form of the everyday, the banal.

Liang: “So we should we get rid of it? [Camera moves slowly.] What if it is yours? [We see him, playing with her hair.] Okay, I won't have it. [Pause.] Okay, I'll have it and bring it up myself. Do you want a child?” Ah Wei: “Is it mine? [She slaps him lightly.] No more jokes

like that, okay?” Liang: “Loads of women could have a child with you. You don’t want to?” They go on in this vein. Later, he says: “I’d give you all you need.” She: “That personality of yours, it’ll be the death of you.” He: “I’d just like to see a little Ah Wei.” Tough, sweet, unconscious and so obviously doomed — by a thousand external pressures and personal inadequacies and a cold-hearted social order.

The scenes of Chiang Bi-yu and Chung Hao-tung in the 1940s are perhaps too reverently done to fully come to life, and it’s understandable why. Hou wants to pay tribute to people who have suffered horribly. He treads carefully, perhaps too carefully. And possibly too he has more of a feeling for his contemporaries. In any event, the figures in the past remain a little distant, their inner lives a bit hard to discern. On the other hand, the scene of the socialist group meeting, in which its members discuss their plans for *The Enlightenment*, is wonderfully done, particularly as I have no reason to believe Hou sympathizes with the group’s goals. He treats them without a hint of condescension or irony. Clearly, these are courageous and farsighted people. Also, as it happens, doomed.

The shot of Chung Hao-tung, who’s been beaten savagely by police, being supported by his comrades as they make their way down the prison corridor stays with you. The subsequent shot of the long, sterile, empty corridor is even more evocative. A number of Taiwanese films have similar images. Their country was a prison for decades. Why should anyone forget it?

It seems legitimate at this point to ask, and not in a provocative manner: how many of those who admire Taiwanese films know something of the island’s history? China ceded Taiwan to Japan after the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). It remained in Japanese hands until the end of World War II, at which point Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang [KMT] forces occupied the island. Friction between the Taiwanese population and the KMT authorities, fueled by oppression, social inequity and shortages created by the war, grew to the boiling point. On February 28, 1947, in response to the beating of a woman cigarette-seller by police, the local population rebelled. The authorities carried out a massacre throughout the island; estimates of the dead range from 18,000 to 28,000.

With the victory of Mao’s forces on the mainland in 1949, Chiang Kai-shek moved the seat of his government to Taiwan. The island became, as the narration in *Good Men, Good Women* has it, “a front line in the anti-Communist struggle.” The KMT regime, supported to the hilt by the United States and the rest of the “Free World,” carried out brutal political repression. Martial law was not lifted until 1987. Only at that point was it possible for filmmakers to raise the “2.28 Incident” and the “White Terror.” *Good Men, Good Women* is dedicated to “all the political victims of the 1950s.” Where else but Taiwan was someone making a film like this in 1995?

Many people admire the Taiwanese and Iranian films of the 1990s. Is it not telling that citizens of both societies suffered for decades under US-backed regimes and were perhaps not so likely to share in the triumphalism that followed the collapse of Stalinism in 1989-91? Filmmakers in those two countries seemed able to keep their wits about them while so many elsewhere were losing theirs. People can pretend all they like that there are North American or European equivalents of Hou and Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, but there aren’t at the moment. And there are reasons for it.

To return to the starting-point: Hou is one of those who understands that historical events have implications for the psychological life of the individual. (He is not unique among Taiwanese directors in this regard. I think of Hsu Hsiao-ming’s *Heartbreak Island*, Wu Nien-jen’s

A Borrowed Life and Wan Jen’s *Super Citizen Ko*, among others.) Here he shows how modern Taiwanese society was born by stamping out what was best in some people and physically eliminating others, and by elevating obedience and the worship of money. And how this helps make people sad today, without their understanding why, and how doubly sad that is.

But this is by no means simply a Taiwanese problem, or the film wouldn’t move and disturb us. The political witch-hunts and the generalized disappointments of the post-war period, for which Stalinism was also responsible, have significance for everyone. In advanced capitalist countries at least the 1950s were marked by that disorienting combination of relative prosperity and psychic devastation. What would a society look like in which much of the energy generated by revolutionary and utopian ideas had been temporarily siphoned off? Look around you.

This film about sadness is full of life. It has too many elements to talk about: the music, the shots of trees, the food, the way people talk to each other like real human beings — not like one supermodel to another, and the beautiful and precise imagery. There are plenty of ambiguities, things I can’t explain, things that can’t be explained. *Good Men, Good Women* adopts a serious attitude to life. It suggests that there are difficult, painful social and personal problems that aren’t going to be solved overnight, or by shortcuts. *Good Men, Good Women* needs to be seen and reseen. Writing about it only gets you so far.

And the conclusions you draw from the film will partly depend on what you bring to it. It’s not “pessimistic.” The real pessimists today are the ones who more or less cheerfully accept the present situation. There’s hopelessness for you! André Breton was another artist who knew that history had psychic consequences. And he wrote that “the feeling that one is lost, however alarming it may be, is not — far from it — one of those feelings that leave man in the depths of despair, precisely because it instinctively begets the question of *how to find a way out.*”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact