

San Francisco International Film Festival 2007

Part 5: Serious, but flawed

David Walsh
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This is the fifth and final article in a series on the 2007 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 26-May 10.

After This Our Exile, from Hong Kong filmmaker Patrick Tam, is an undeniably serious effort. It concentrates on a father and son relationship in the 1990s in Malaysia. The boy's mother, Lin (Charlie Young), absents herself relatively early in the film, after a first failed attempt to escape provokes a beating. The father, Shing (Aaron Kwok), is a Chinese cook, a one-time ladies' man now somewhat gone to seed, who owes substantial gambling debts to the wrong sort of people. The boy, Lok-Yun (Goum Ian Iskandar), looks on as his family disintegrates.

Shing loses his job, and then he and his son are forced to leave town because of the loan sharks. They begin living in a rooming house of some sort, and the father hangs around with a prostitute. In fact, he starts operating as her pimp. He also forces his son to rob houses, until the boy is caught, at which point Shing runs away. When the latter comes to visit his son in custody, Lok-Yun has finally had enough and he attacks his father violently. A brief epilogue, set ten years later, reveals what's become of the pair.

Tam was a significant figure in the Hong Kong New Wave in the 1980s. He last made a film in 1989. In the intervening years he taught cinema and edited films for other directors, including fellow Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai.

About his decision to stop directing 17 years ago, Tam told an interviewer for the Associated Press that his early films were thin on content and he was not happy with rushed shooting schedules and artistic compromises. "I exhausted much of my creative energy, but I wasn't that satisfied with my output. I thought maybe it was time to take a break, reflect a bit to see what direction I should take."

He told an interviewer from *cinemasie.com*: "As a whole I had almost complete freedom in working on this [*After This Our Exile*]; that's why the film is as close as possible to what I hoped for."

At the screening of the film in San Francisco, Tam explained that the film had emerged from "a reflective mood" and that the subject was "close to my heart." No one would have any reason to suggest otherwise. The film is both thoughtful and deeply felt. This, however, doesn't solve every problem.

After This Our Exile, whose script was the product of Tam's work with his film students in the 1990s, is nearly three hours long, yet chooses not to make any generalized statements about life in Malaysia or any other question.

The film's first sequence, in which Lin's first attempts to leave are thwarted, is lengthy, detailed and convincingly done, virtually taking place in 'real time.' We feel that she once loved Shing, but that she's grown tired of his unpredictable temper, his gambling and, presumably, his philandering. She's mostly weary of a life that is leading nowhere and wants out at all costs.

For his part, Shing is tense and unhappy, capable of explosive violence and also expressions of considerable tenderness. He doesn't wish to be a

tyrant, but he's determined to keep his failing family unit together. If Lin leaves, one senses, everything in this world will fall apart. As it eventually does. The boy meanwhile watches his parents' struggles with growing alarm.

These early scenes are compelling and painful, they ring true. What are these people to do? How can they emerge from this apparently hopeless situation?

If the truth be told, however, Tam's film never develops beyond this original point. These initial relationships expand or extend quantitatively, so to speak, but not qualitatively. The mother finds a means of escape eventually and settles into a comfortable middle class life with another man (one has the impression that she is returning to the social milieu whence she came and that her relationship with 'bad boy' Shing had been something of a rebellion, now regretted, against a conventional or complacent upbringing).

Shing simply and continually lives up to our first impressions of him. He commits one thoughtless or selfish act after another, until it all catches up with him and his own son turns on him fiercely. Aaron Kwok's performance is intriguing at first, all wild eyes and nervous gestures, impatience and yet a certain awareness of his own failings, with guilt somewhere deep in the eyes. But this goes on for 160 minutes with little alteration.

Again, this is the character of the film as a whole. For the most part events and people in *After This Our Exile*, like Newtonian particles, remain at rest or move with constant speed in a straight line unless subjected to external force. The lack of inner self-movement, differentiation, genuine contradiction, grows wearing.

Is this how Tam sees the world, or history? One assumes so. Inertia here is all. Human beings are apparently let loose in the world with certain built-in psychic mechanisms and proceed along predictable lines until disaster strikes. A commentator suggests that "Like many filmmakers of his generation, Tam is shadowed by patriarchal complexities both on a personal level and in connotations of Hong Kong's pre-'97 relationship with China."

This may very well be so, but it does not necessarily raise one's overall estimation of the film. Tam presents an essentially impossible father figure against whom one is obliged to revolt. Although Kwok's character is relatively frenetic and carries out a variety of activities, mostly shady, he remains largely an abstraction.

What is Shing's history? We see him working in a cheap restaurant and living with his wife (or girl-friend) and son in a shabby little house, an immigrant presumably (critics who seem to know suggest that the family comes from Hong Kong). He is, on the whole, an unpleasant type, toward whom the filmmaker offers little sympathy. The work simply ends up pointing the finger of blame in his direction. He's responsible for the whole mess. Is that true? And does this illuminate the primordial father-and-son problem, much less the nature of the China-Hong Kong relationship? In any event, even the former evolves under different

circumstances.

Things are changing rapidly in the part of the world Tam treats in his film, including family structure and every other aspect of life. While there are valuable and psychologically authentic moments in *After This Our Exile*, the filmmaker, although clearly someone of intelligence and sensitivity, has not yet worked out or even *worked on* some of the most vexing historical and social problems.

The Yacoubian Building is an extravagant, ambitious film from Egypt, directed by Marwan Hamed. Also nearly three hours in length, the work, based on a best-selling novel, is an effort to provide a panoramic view of Egyptian life.

The building in question, in downtown Cairo, was built for the city's upper crust in 1937. A voiceover explains the changes it has seen over the years. At present, the tenants represent a social microcosm, from the well-to-do, although somewhat down at the heels, to the poor who live in rooftop laundry rooms.

A number of characters are introduced: the son of the building's doorman who aspires to be a policeman and, once denied the possibility of economic advancement, turns to Islamic fundamentalism; a young woman forced to take a series of demeaning jobs; an aging playboy, a former aristocrat, at bitter odds with his sister; a businessman who has risen from humble origins and now seeks a second wife, as well as a career in politics; a gay newspaper editor; and many others.

Reportedly the most expensive Egyptian film ever made, *The Yacoubian Building* paints a generally unflattering portrait of the society. Greed, corruption and brutality predominate in the elite. The film takes for granted, more or less, that those with money are thieves willing to do anything to hold on to their wealth. Those who aspire to join their ranks bow and scrape (as the ambitious politician remarks, you have to "dance for the monkey when it's king"). The poor are excluded, abused, exploited, driven to take extreme measures. A shoot-out between the police and fundamentalist forces is graphically presented.

Rather flamboyant, a bit crude, not without its own stereotypes and sentimentality, Hamed's film nevertheless demonstrates some courage and insight. It reveals more about the rot of Egyptian society than any comparable commercial film in the US.

A breakthrough? A film made by a Japanese director under the age of 40 discovers the existence of social life, including class antagonisms. Even poverty! Of course, Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi*, *After Life*, *Nobody Knows*) has found all this in the year 1702, but one should not be too particular. A breakthrough is a breakthrough.

Hana concerns a samurai, Soza, who arrives in a poor district of Edo (now Tokyo) in pursuit of revenge against his father's killer. Soza, however, is a most reluctant samurai, who would rather play with the neighborhood kids, is useless with a sword and falls heavily for a pretty widow, Osae, who lives across from him. After his money goes, he earns a living teaching writing and abacus.

The object of his revenge, it turns out, has given up his sword and is now living quietly with his wife and child, working as a laborer. He seems quite likeable. A group of samurai meanwhile have moved into the neighborhood, with their own agenda, revenge for the death by suicide of their lord. They're suspicious of Soza, since he's not making any moves to exact bloody vengeance. When he's spotted at the local well, someone says, "I never heard of a samurai pulling a rope." About his prospects for revenge, a friend cheerfully tells him, "With your skills, you're doomed."

When Soza and Osae visit a shrine, she tells him, "It's sad to think that hatred is all that remains to you of your father's life." This thought deeply affects him. While the other samurai go ahead with their plan for bloody revenge, Soza takes another path.

The film, with its pacifist-humanist bent, is something of an homage to Shohei Imamura, the great Japanese filmmaker and enemy of everything official. The scenes of slum life are quite amusing and generous. The poor

complain, "We're less than dogs to the Shogun anyway." (These scenes have more life than the totality of Kore-eda's previous films.)

The director explains: "After the tragic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the emotion of 'taking revenge' seemed to have covered the entire world. Japan was not an exception. Not only did the people in power, but also ordinary people have started making nationalistic statements out loud, even going as far as talking disrespectfully of other countries, as if to confirm the superiority of their own."

Hana, Kore-eda explains, is his response to these developments.

"I had wanted to depict the sturdy lives of common people, people who have a strong sense of 'living,' by also mocking the common trend. By having the protagonist place himself within these people (including the family of his opponent which he must take revenge on) and their 'sense of life,' I had him find a way to step aside from the 'chain reaction of death' ...

"This film isn't a 'story of growth,' in which a weak person grows strong by trying to be hard. It's an affirmation of the weak staying weak. However, the meaning of 'weakness' changes within the context of the people around them. I believe in that sense, this is a film of 'changes'. As these changes link together, the *world* will little by little become a gentler place. I hope I was able to create that kind of *world* in this film."

I thought poorly of Kore-eda's previous films, abstract and rather narcissistic studies of individual trauma. This film has some heart and substance to it. It's too early to say, but perhaps Japanese filmmaking will turn its attention once again to concrete reality, to life as it's lived by wider layers of the population. One could do far worse than to imitate Imamura in this regard.

Speaking of the unhappy trend of abstract studies of individual trauma, divorced from social life, certain French and other European filmmakers are still pursuing this unfruitful avenue.

On Fire (Claire Simon), *A Parting Shot* (Jeanne Waltz) and *7 Years* (Jean-Pascal Hattu) from France and *Rage* (Züli Aladag) from Germany are all strained efforts.

This group of French directors, unfortunately, has not yet recovered from postmodern "difference" and "micro-politics."

In *On Fire*, a teenage girl "burns" for a firefighter, with tragic consequences; in *A Parting Shot*, a young woman and rifle champion, furious at her father, acts out her anger by shooting a stranger in the leg ("If I'm not dead," she tells him, comfortingly, "it's because the bullet hit you!"); in *7 Years*, the wife of a convict (in prison for reasons that we never learn) becomes involved in a murky relationship with her husband's jailer.

The three films tell self-consciously individual stories. The directors do everything in their power to let us know that they have no generalizations to make, no criticism of social institutions to offer (while humanity, on the other hand, for the most part comes off badly). That's their privilege certainly, but the methods are contrived and the results, weak. Director Simon (*On Fire*) explains: "The idea of a young woman starting a fire bowled me over ..." All right, but why?

In *Rage*, the son of a well-respected professor comes into conflict with a Turkish street tough. According to the festival catalogue, the film "explodes into a shocking and unsettling culture clash that exposes the raw underbelly of racial and class tensions in this Berlin suburb." Yes, well ...

"Rage" is very much the order of the day in the film, as the various characters torment and lacerate one another. No doubt director Aladag, born in Turkey himself, wanted to say something about the relations between immigrants and Germans, but any serious ideas or concerns are lost in the overwrought and unconvincing verbal and physical abuse.

Concluded



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