

Edward Yang's *Taipei Story* (1985) depicts a city of sadness and alienation

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Taipei Story (1985), one of the early films of Edward Yang (1947-2007), a major Taiwanese director, was recently screened in the US for the first time, and the brief commercial run will be followed by its release on DVD.

Yang was one of a number of Taiwanese filmmakers who emerged in the 1980s, insisting on a more realistic and serious approach to life, as opposed to the largely escapist films of the 1970s. The new Taiwanese Cinema has been compared in some respects to Italian neorealism in the post-World War II period, and also to some of the early films of the French New Wave.

Taiwanese films in the 1980s began to grapple, at least indirectly, with the island's history under Japanese colonial rule up until 1945, followed by the dictatorial regime of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao in 1949 led to the flight of Chiang's government from the mainland to Taiwan. Yang himself was born in Shanghai, but grew up on Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, under the martial law administration of Chiang's Nationalists.

In *Taipei Story*, Yang depicts a world far removed from the usual picture of Taiwan as one of the so-called Asian Tigers, characterized by uninterrupted economic growth, harmony and progress for every section of the population. The postwar decades, particularly beginning in the 1970s in Taiwan, were certainly ones of rapid industrialization, but this was accompanied by huge class conflict, dislocation and crisis.

Some of the tensions are brought to life through the two main characters in *Taipei Story*, Chin (Tsai Chin) and her boyfriend Lung (Hou Hsiao-hsien). Chin is a young woman pursuing success in the business world, while Lung is a former Little League baseball player who, having recently returned from an apparently

unrewarding stay in the US, is unhappy about his job as a fabric seller. The baseball references are a reminder of how important the sport became in Taiwan, beginning during the nearly five decades of Japanese rule that came to a conclusion in the Second World War.

Chin suddenly loses her job when her company runs into financial difficulties and is acquired by a larger competitor. Worried about the future, including Lung's commitment to their relationship, she looks up an old colleague, an architect with whom she seems to contemplate an affair. She also socializes with a group of her sister's friends, including young business types who have spent time in the West. This leads to an angry clash between Lung and some of these men in a local bar, after they begin taunting him about his lack of success and sophistication.

Taipei Story proceeds through a series of vignettes, cutting abruptly between the lives and the mounting problems of its two protagonists. Lung, though drifting and unhappy, will not cut himself off from various friends and family. When Chin's father presses him for money to help meet his gambling losses, Lung obliges, even though this will deplete his savings and interfere with his own hopes for a different future.

Lung literally runs into an old baseball teammate from his youth, who is now driving a taxi (Wu Nien-jen). The friend, working 15 or 20 hours a day to survive, is inattentive and rear-ends Lung's car. Thirty years old, he looks much older. His wife spends most of her time gambling while he anxiously tries to provide for his young family of three small children. Once again, Lung insists on offering money.

Amidst the sense of general bleakness and foreboding, the character of Lung in particular stands out. He combines empathy with a temper that explodes,

as we see in the bar scene, when he is pushed beyond his limits. This eventually leads to tragic consequences. Lung's dreams of the Little League world championship, held annually in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, find a macabre echo in the closing scene of the movie.

There is much in *Taipei Story* that richly rings true. Chin's architect friend remarks, looking at a rooftop view of the city, that he cannot tell any more what he has contributed to the skyline, which all looks so drab and alike. Street scenes and views from inside apartments provide a lifelike, convincing picture of frenetic activity amid continuing economic struggle. The logos of Japanese multinationals such as Fuji and NEC hint at the influence of giant corporations on the lives of ordinary Taiwanese.

The two leads, Tsai Chin as Chin and Hou Hsiao-hsien as Lung, are never less than formidable in their portrayal of this unhappy and alienated couple. Tsai, a pop music star, went on to become Yang's first wife. Hou, the most prominent of the Taiwanese filmmakers whose works began reaching an international audience in the 1980s, is especially powerful in this acting role. He and Yang assisted Chu Tien-wen in writing the script. She is well known as the screenwriter for many of Hou's films. The same year that *Taipei Story* first appeared also saw the completion of Hou's masterful *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*. Wu Nien-jen, the son of a coal miner, became one of Taiwan's most prolific screenwriters, and directed the remarkable *A Borrowed Life* (1994), a semi-autobiographical film.

Yang, an almost exact contemporary of the now 70-year-old Hou, made only seven feature films before his death from cancer 10 years ago. The work of both of these directors was shaped by the harsh years of the anti-communist dictatorship in Taiwan, and a generally oppositional and dissident viewpoint comes through. In *Taipei Story*, we see a couple who have dreams, who are trying to make their way in life in the face of obstacles that are not of their own making. One gets the distinct feeling that Lung's empathy is that of the filmmaker himself.

This takes Yang only so far, however. There is a mood of foreboding, of general sadness and gloom, surrounding this couple, but the reasons for it are not explored in any depth. It is not a matter of asking for a more "uplifting" story. The bleakness and alienation

are accurate and genuine enough, but they raise other questions that aren't addressed.

Some have suggested that *Taipei Story* is an exposé of the Taiwanese middle class, but this avoids the issue. Yang seems to be responding to the grimness and competitive struggle for survival ushered in by the economic changes in Taiwan by ascribing personal tragedies to the changes themselves (modernization, Westernization, globalization, technology), to the weaknesses of individuals, or to "human nature," rather than to the structure of the society within which these changes are taking place.

The ability to portray these characters even more fully required, among other things, a deeper examination of the problems of Chinese and Taiwanese history and the character of the Chinese Revolution in particular, a complex task that the WSWS has discussed in some detail in the past, including with reference to Taiwanese cinema.

Taiwanese filmmaking today is a shadow of its former self, having proved unable to confront the challenges of the recent decades. But the films of Yang and Hou in particular testify to its strength and sincerity in its heyday.



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