

Taiwan and the Auteur: The Forging of an Identity

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Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis (2005) *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island*
New York: Columbia University Press
ISBN: 0 231 12899 1
312 pp

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis aptly titled *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* is a veritable jewel for those interested in Taiwanese film culture and its domestic and international evolution. Yeh and Davis's clear and succinct initial statement that the book is "a study of selected Taiwan film directors" (1) projects a false sense of simplicity that is immediately shattered when one realises the enormity of the subject. *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* is not merely an exposition of major contemporary Taiwanese directors, it can be considered as more a work of reference that delves into Taiwanese cinematic culture as a means of socio-economic and socio-political self expression. Yeh and Davis attempt, and succeed, in presenting a comprehensive overview of Taiwan's national cinema stretching from the often controversial and renowned Taiwan New Cinema directors to the "post-New Cinema" climate. They succeed also in presenting what could be viewed as essentially a humanist-driven narrative, mapping out the complex relationship that exists between the directors and their films, the directors and their environment and finally the directors and the authors themselves.

An area of cinema studies with limited exploration, with the notable exception of Chris Berry and Feii Lu's *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* (2005), Yeh and Davis provide the reader with an insight into the complexities of Taiwanese film that is highly commendable, exploring themes and issues thoroughly and vigorously. The text

takes the reader on a journey through Taiwan's past, something that is essential if one is to extrapolate its future domestic and international direction. An historiographical approach allows Yeh and Davis to provide the reader with a point of reference for future exploration in the area, and this is particularly important for those interested in undertaking further research into specific Taiwanese directors and their impact on the domestic and international film scene. The authors themselves point out that the book is far from being representative of the whole of Taiwanese cinema, and that they hope their work will provide the impetus for more exhaustive and comprehensive director specific analysis.

The history of Taiwan is as complicated and as ethnically diverse as the cinematic offerings of its most prominent filmmakers. The island has always been a focal point of contention amongst those in power who realised its strategic worth during times of trade and turmoil. Having experienced Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Chinese rule, Taiwan has also endured Japanese occupation as well as proclamations of independence. The island, and its "cultural residues" therefore becomes something to be fought over, a treasure of sorts, and it is from this notion of historical struggle (and the ensuing identity issues resulting from such as history) that Yeh and Davis consider Taiwan's filmmakers and their works.

Historically Taiwanese cinema had been viewed as a vehicle by which to encourage and increase exposure to state governed nationalism. Utilized first by the Kuomintang (KMT) to promote anti-communist rhetoric Taiwanese cinema was then used as a communicative tool for the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was seen, essentially, as a governmental authority tool through which to reach a majority of people in a relatively small geographical space Taiwan's New Cinema directors began to forge their own sense of identity and character within the island's celluloid culture. Transforming Taiwan cinema from one that was focused upon the national identity to one distinctly auteur in nature, the Taiwan New Cinema directors were viewed as the saviours of Taiwanese cinema.

The issue of authorship emerges as one of the single most important themes within the text and is used as a comparative tool throughout the book. Yeh and Davis consistently and conscientiously draw the reader's attention to the socio-political climate surrounding the rise of the film industry in Taiwan. The role of the auteur directors and their impact upon both the immediate environment within the Taiwan film industry and the environment outside of the industry (politics, schooling) is never marginalised.

Aware of negative opinions and theories surrounding the validity of promoting auteur directors internationally at the short-term expense of domestic markets, Yeh and Davis argue that it is the very lure of the director-auteurs, and their unique vision and product that will help, in the future, to sustain Taiwanese film both nationally and internationally. The text aims to dispel such anxieties and does so convincingly through the thorough and extensive research that highlights Taiwan's cinematic strength. Yeh and Davis move effortlessly through the political past detailing the dramatic change from state dominated constructions of identity towards a more realistic and representative modern Taiwanese identity.

Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island has two clear objectives. The first is to introduce readers to Taiwanese cinema, which is achieved through carefully constructed essays on prominent directors like Ang Lee and Hou Hsiao-hsien as well as directing interest towards less commercially successful directors such as Wan Ren and Wang Tong. Yeh and Davis also include some filmmakers who, whilst not of Taiwanese origin, have nonetheless made an impact upon the local cinematic landscape and a positive contribution towards Taiwan film. The text does not aim to preclude those readers already familiar with Taiwan cinema; it is a companion for both the novice and the professional cinema studies reader and consistently attempts to engage and encourage a new dialectical response to the directors, Taiwanese cinema and the island's industry itself.

Of particular interest is the increasingly popular Ang Lee, who has arguably become one of Taiwan's most successful exports. Lee is the subject of an interesting chapter entitled "Confucianizing Hollywood" (177-215), the main premise being that Lee, through the influence of Confucian based principles, is remolding Hollywood and film history towards Confucian influenced ideals of integrity, discipline and ethical economic worth. Yeh and Davis make a convincing argument that a Taiwanese director might have such an impact on Hollywood. The popularity of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* is discussed in reference to Lee's evolution as an auteur within the international film industry and pays special attention to his insistence upon the projection of what can be called a Chinese authenticity. Yeh and Davis manage to present a fairly detailed retrospective of Lee's work which fleshes out his preoccupation with the presentation of Chinese/Taiwanese values.

The internationally renowned Hou Hsiao-hsien is also the subject of intense scrutiny that seeks to question his traditional placement within the Oriental discourse of East versus West. Hou's metamorphosis from "box office poison" (134) to cultural and sometime

political icon is discussed in reference to his biographical storytelling. In working through Hou's autobiographical approach to cinema, Yeh and Davis are able to position New Cinema within a wider movement, that of international new cinema. The collaborations that Hou undertook from the early 1970's is shown to have had a positive influence on the direction of Taiwan cinema. Yeh and Davis use Hou as a mark of the success of the industry and its ability to transform contemporary Taiwan.

Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island places a special emphasis on the prominent visual style and conventions of each director. The focus upon Edward Yang, Ang Lee, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang's individual penchant for particular styles and characteristics builds up a visual image of each director's representative body of works. The reader is able to visually imagine the films in question and this is sometimes supplemented with the addition of various film stills to further reinforce their descriptions. Yeh and Davis discuss the use of narrative, in particular the exploration of identity, personal and shared history and visual and aural connections to the environment.

Yeh and Davis' second objective is to provide the reader with in-depth analysis of the impact of Chinese cultural traditions on Taiwanese film. In this sense *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* focuses upon Taiwanese filmmakers and their complex and intrinsic relationship with their surrounding environment.

The presentation and arrangement of the text mirrors the complex nature of the Taiwanese film industry and the directors who work within it. Yeh and Davis successfully integrate film analysis and historical socio-economic and socio-cultural research. One of the particular strengths of the text is that the essays are strong enough to be read singly. However that said, the presence of significant themes and issues such as authorial authenticity and shared experiences creates linkages between the chapters thus creating connections between one section and the next. The close relationship between a filmmaker and their socio-economic and socio-political environment is one that should be deployed more within the field of cinema studies. A close analysis can only serve to increase the knowledge of the intrinsic nature that exists between film and identity. The postscript (249-255) eloquently recapitulates the systemic relationship between identity, nationhood and cinema.

Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island will no doubt be regarded as a pioneering text within the field of cinema studies. The close analysis of Taiwan's most famous directors contributes towards the reader's understanding of the filmic Taiwan as a created, culturally

specific entity. Each director reorganises this image and thus in the process recreates a Taiwan in line with their own experiences. The treasure island of Yeh and Davis' aptly titled work exists within the works of these directors and the book does a remarkable job making them gleam.

Bibliography

Berry, Chris and Feii Lu (2005) *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After*. Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong.