

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films: pursuing and escaping history

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ABSTRACT *This article situates Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films in the post Cold-War global setting. It discusses two common interpretive approaches to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films – French auteurism and 'national allegory' – and puts these two approaches within their historical context of Cold-War and post Cold-War global politics. The article places the rise of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films parallel to the rise of the mainland fifth generation of film directors, pointing out that their apparently opposite directions – Hou Hsiao-Hsien going political in his Taiwan trilogy and the fifth generation film directors going apolitical – are part and parcel of the same phenomenon of alternative politics in its particular contexts and the reconstruction of a new identity politics. Particular attention is given to Hou's Taiwan trilogy, Flowers of Shanghai, and Coffee Jikou.*

KEYWORDS: Hou Hsiao-Hsien, auteurism, national allegory, Cold War, post-Cold War, history, Taiwan films

Axes of interpretation

It is dangerous to try to offer a deep reading of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's works, but not because Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film world is an elaborate labyrinth. On the contrary, his films are often plain and down-to-earth from start to finish, demonstrating emotional suffering and bewilderment yet without narcissism or affected sentiment. His films gaze squarely at history and its trauma with frankness and ease. Reading his films is 'dangerous' not because they suggest a myriad of conflicting readings, but because they seductively invite clear and simple approaches to interpretation.

One simple approach is auteurism. Hou Hsiao-Hsien is a mature first-rate film director; and his films display a clear set of personal narrative styles, from *The Boys from Fengkuei*, which won him international fame in 1983, to *Café Lumière* (*Coffee Jikou*) in 2004. He has been recognized in various international film festivals in Europe as the leading Chinese film director and one of the leading film directors of Asia. In the eyes of Euro-

pean culture, especially in France, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films are seen as entirely original, and therefore as embodying the 'pure film' genre. Jean-Michel Frodon explains:

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films question all the cinematic elements, and break from the European tradition of fiction and theater art. This places his films at the core of modern cinema. ... Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films address a particular history, geography, and culture. These films are not based on films by others. Hou is closer to the original formalist inventors of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Fritz Lang, F.W. Murnau, Carl Theodor Dreyer and the Russian formalists, than to the New Wave movement of the mid-1950s, which grew out of the long cinematic tradition in France, America, Italy, and Japan. (Frodon 1999: 27)

Starting from the mid-1980s, there have been many new waves of Chinese films. As a film auteur, however, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's only equal in representational style is the Iranian film director Abbas Kiarostami. In

terms of treating historical themes, the closest Asian film director to Hou Hsiao-Hsien is the famous Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu. When Hou Hsiao-Hsien was invited to make a Japanese film *Coffee Jikou* to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of Yasujiro Ozu, he was widely regarded as the obvious choice for the job.

A second simple approach reads the films as what Fredric Jameson called third-world 'nation-state allegories.' Here, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Taiwan trilogy – *A City of Sadness* (1989), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), and *Good Men, Good Women* (1995) – seems to be the best entry point. From here, readers can proceed forward or backward into the history of Taiwanese society, revealing the memory of blood and pain in a heavy and many-layered emotional structure.

These two modes of interpretation clearly occupy different discursive spaces: the author-focused approach is international or more specifically European, while the national allegory approach is favored by third-world critics. It is interesting to note that although these two interpretations may seem to differ only in interpretive strategies and emphases, in reality they differ more fundamentally in their historical roots and discursive purposes.

The authorial approach, which began after the Second World War, focused on the dimension of individualistic style and aesthetics, as if the author, once declared to be dead, had been resurrected in the young body of film. As a recognition mechanism and critical practice, auteurism started by selectively recognizing Hollywood film directors and later became more of an internal European or Western European cultural phenomenon, focusing on European filmmakers and art films. By the time auteurism became a synonym for 'art film' or 'film artist' in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it stood for resistance to commercial films as represented by Hollywood and its narrative models. Auteurism became the recognition mechanism mediated by European film festivals. In so-called 'world cinema,' there are therefore two unequal powers: Hollywood/commercial films and French/West-

ern European/art films, each involving global film distribution, film showings and film criticism. Auteurism, coming of age in the intellectual rebellions of the 1960s, holds certain critical attitudes and maintains a certain distance from the universal (American) values promoted by Hollywood. But auteurism also condones the great (European) humanist tradition based on 'individuality,' 'aesthetics' and 'originality.' If it had some radical influence during its time, then this radical influence has now become a post-modern political practice which holds that 'the personal is political.'

Different from the ahistorical and apolitical focus on the author, the national allegorical reading of literature and art, from its inception, was based on a salient geopolitical idea: the Third World 'in the era of multinational capitalism.' It is first of all historical, communal, and political.

Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (Jameson 1986: 69)

As a result, *auteurism* and the 'national allegory' approach are incompatible in the evaluation and interpretation of one artist's works. The difference is not only in the dimension of time (modernity and post-industrial societies), but also in the dimension of space (Western Europe, North America, and the Third World).

In view of these two divergent interpretive paths and attractions to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films, perhaps we should also take account of a Cold War to post-Cold War axis. We should read Hou's films in the historical context of the Cold War and post Cold War, to re-politicize the auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsien. This means placing auteurism and the national allegory approach within such a historical context as well. Like the development of the concept of the Third World, auteurism and the national allegory approach were both born in the specific

historical period of the Cold War. The rise of Asian/Chinese films on the world stage through the medium of European international art film festivals was directly related to the drastic geopolitical changes from the Cold War to the post-Cold War. Another historical reference linking the non-European-American or third-world films is the national liberation movements that happened simultaneously with the Cold War and had a very complicated historical relationship with the Cold War.

The appearance of the numerical designation 'Third World' was itself a product of the Cold War structure. Putting aside the history of the term, 'Third World' has always been associated with the undeveloped regions and countries in most of Asia, Africa, and Latin-America. It shows a third kind of existence outside the Western camp, led by the USA, and the Eastern camp, led by the Soviet Union. Here, I only want to point out three distinctive features of Third World discourse in the Cold War context. First, the term was first adopted by the majority of Asian, African, and Latin American countries, with the help of the non-aligned movement and the Bandung Conference, at which China proposed a 'Third World' theory to break through the enemy encirclement of China. Third World theory was adopted by the pan-Asian-African and pan-Latin American movements, in order to obtain their own rights to exist, speak, and exercise national sovereignty in the Cold War structure of dividing humanity into two camps. Secondly, the Third World was constructed by the hegemonic battles between the US and the Soviet Union through their military and political assistance and intervention. The US and the Soviet Union fought over these Third World regions for ideological influence and economic dominance. Thirdly, and closely linked to our current topic, Third World theory was given importance by post-war European and American intellectuals whose critical theory was a discursive transference to the Third World. Here, 'Third World' became the Other in the self-criticism of European culture and the overcoming of

Cold War dichotomies. In a sense, the political and spiritual crises in France created by Algeria's war for independence directly and indirectly produced the new-wave French films and the French 'film author' theory, while Fredric Jameson's article 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' proposed the concept of 'Third World national allegory.' The article attempted to create an island of resistance in the Western total system, to speak for Third World nationalism and to highlight national allegorical writing (Jameson 1986). Such practice was itself the politics of the Other within the Western/American culture, a social and cultural grounding outside the binary structure of the Cold War.

The interesting thing is that during the entire Cold War period, Hollywood and eastern bloc socialist realism occupied the majority of the global cinematic market. The European new wave of films amid the post-war European devastation, reconstruction, and crisis was third in importance in the global film industry. The end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changes in Eastern Europe brought about the collapse of the Soviet and eastern bloc film industry. The Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, later named as one of the greatest European film directors of the twentieth century, came to be regarded as a French director. His experience is a kind of trophy of Western historical victory.

Although the end of the Cold War reunified Europe, it did not revive the glory of European art films. On the contrary, long before the end of the Cold War, with the establishment of new liberalism in England and America, Hollywood as the sole transnational film superpower had already invaded the European film market, just as it demolished the film industry in other countries. In the last 20 years of the twentieth century, while European art films were declining, the European film industry began a global set of institutions that recognize and introduce non-European-American film artists and their products through European international film festivals.

Without going into questions about the power relationship between Europe and the Third World, or the cultural mechanisms by which Third World films made their way to European film festivals, we can point out that the selection of Third World film artists usually marks their works as expressing dissident views in the context of their home social political system, and as produced 'underground' or independently of the established industry of their home countries. However, the transcendental norms and standards of auteurism conceal the political contexts, obscuring the films' involvement with real conflicts outside of the scripts. Like various other international awards, the Western European international film festivals clearly share the purpose of political assistance or 'enlightenment' of countries perceived to be in need of such modernizing help. But a complication is added by the many roles of the 'author's film' during the Cold War: critical, left-wing, and European (as against Hollywood). The award-winning non-European and non-American films at these European international film festivals are therefore placed within many subject-object relationships.

Among these many axes of significance, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films reflect a rich variety of images and meanings. It is especially interesting that the year 1983, when Hou Hsiao-Hsien began his 'author films' series with his fourth film, *The Boys from Fengkuei*, and thus began the new wave of Taiwan films, was also the year when young mainland directors produced the film *One and Eight* (1984) and began the new wave of Chinese films. Coincidentally, the art film movements on both sides of the Taiwan Straits began simultaneously although these two places were completely separated by the Cold War. Taiwan new-wave films began with films about the native land, and the mainland fifth-generation films began by telling sentimental stories of the lost youth of the fourth generation. While the Taiwan film screen was showing a lone individual who has tired of urban life and returned to his hometown in the countryside, the mainland screen was showing self-conscious allegories

of the nation-state. And while these new-wave art films on both sides of the Straits reflected the entrance of many new film artists and won many international awards at European film festivals, the native film industries on both sides of the Straits was in continuous decline as local markets for native films were collapsing. The emergence of the new-wave films and the decline of the local film industries foretold the coming of drastic social changes on both sides of the Straits.

In a sense, in the 1980s, the beginning of the global new liberalism within the framework of Cold War institutions allowed a deep social democratization in both China and Taiwan. With the aging of the military totalitarian regimes in China and Taiwan, forces of social resistance began to gather, and there emerged a promise of future transformation and reconciliation. As with many other latecomers to modernization, the changes flanking the Taiwan Straits began with changes in culture and art, in which literary writers and other creative artists played an important role. Not by coincidence, the direct or indirect involvement in social politics by intellectuals and artists was mainly by way of non-political expression. This was not just because the depoliticized cultural practice distanced itself from the orthodox/main ideology of the reigning regime, but also because such depoliticized expression often successfully obtained recognition of alternative politics in its particular context, calling for and reconstructing a new identity politics. Perhaps, it is from this perspective, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's 'author-film' series, in its 'pure' individualized writing, began the cultural-political practice among Taiwan films.

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, when the world entered the so-called post-Cold War era, as the Soviet Union disintegrated and capitalism won without a fight, a special Cold-War situation in the post-Cold-War time began to emerge in northeast Asia and the Taiwan Straits. Even after the fall of the Berlin wall, the Cold-War division still existed between South and North Korea, and

between China and Taiwan. The American military bases whose presence was to secure the divisions were reinforced. The various nationalisms on both sides of these divisions made this region one of the most tense in the world. In this context, the art-film directors in China and Taiwan began a re-politicized practice in their creative works. In the case of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, when the heavy historical cloud began to dissipate, beginning with *A City of Sadness*, his films launched a clear political intervention in reality.

Traces of memory

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films remind people of the films by Francois Truffaut (the originator and conscious practitioner of the idea of 'author-films'), and especially his 'Antoine Doinel' series. From *The Boys from Fengkuei* and *Daughters of the Nile* (1987), Hou's films are inscribed with his own personal memories. The coming-of-age stories in his films are quite revealing. However, unlike the narcissistic, melancholic, and mocking tone in Truffaut's 'Antoine Doinel' series, the tone of Hou's films narrating youth is meandering and slow, clear of narcissism and affectation, until the historical memory of the bloodshed and gun-shot suddenly intrudes in the film *A City of Sadness*. After *A City of Sadness*, Hou's films no longer deal directly with the traumatic history of Taiwan; and yet his later films seem to be forever wrestling with the ghosts of history, from the personal memory in *The Puppet-master* to the re-encounter with history in *Good Men, Good Women*. However, the attempt to escape the nightmarish past only invites it back to the present through the process of repression. *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) is an exception, though: it portrays a past directly, staging the late Qing era in a closed environment. The original novel on which the film is based takes place in the foreign concession in Shanghai, and the film is the result of the historical links among Zhang Ailing, Hu Lancheng, the Zhu sisters, and the Taiwan new-wave films.

It is fair to say that Hou's films always center on reminiscences and the search for

memories. He is forever looking for and recording the lost 'best times.' A Japanese film critic, Shigehiko Hasumi, has raised the question, 'What do these absences and longings in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films mean?' Hasumi's own answer to his question is:

During the turbulent years of the Second World War, Taiwan went from being a Japanese colony to being a part of China, looking very much to past and future. For Hou Hsiao-Hsien, who left the mainland to come to Taiwan in very early childhood, the present tense was always an insignificant speck among grand historical dramas. A long time passed before Hou realized this, but the loss and absence of the present tense were the important experiences in his childhood and youth. Because it was not possible to touch on the present, he turned to the history and the past of a Taiwan which he had not experienced. The lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987 made it more possible for him to do so. The finely detailed 'sadness' in Hou's historical trilogy films can be regarded as the profound expression of loss in the collective memory and in his personal memory. (Hasumi 1999: 27)

We can also situate Hou's films in the historical framework of the Second World War and the Cold War. As a chronicler of personal history, Hou Hsiao-Hsien experienced his youth as a closed and suspended 'present' – it was a temporary residence, a waiting with no end in sight, a stopover by a family in constant relocation. As a historian writing with his camera, Hou Hsiao-Hsien created an allegory for contemporary Taiwan: the light and cheap bamboo furniture in Fengshan's home. It could be discarded easily before moving, corresponding to Chiang Kai-shek's coffin in the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall. This comparison occurred several times in the film, showing the frozen and undeveloped historical moment. While the Japanese occupation and departure divided Taiwan's twentieth century into two halves, the division of the Cold War became a spatial division across the Taiwan Straits. The

Nationalist desire to return to the mainland became an empty and absurd narrative. If the Cold War cut short, blocked or emptied Taiwan society from historical depth, then the prolonged delay of the 'return to the mainland' put the future forever into a realm of cloudy doubt or inaccessibility. From this perspective, the early films by Hou Hsiao-Hsien showed a closed present, a present that struggled to move on but ran into the glass walls. The repeated images of railroad trains, of waiting on the platform, and of repeated journeys, represented a certain spatial mode of existence on the Taiwan island, but also a rupture and suspension of time and meaning. For instance, in the film *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1985), the old grandmother who wanted to return to her hometown packed up her cloth bundle but was unable to walk across the bridge. Images like this are allegorical explorations of the absurdity of the fate of Taiwan and the promise of 'returning to the mainland.'

The literal history within these films is a certain kind of personal coming-of-age story. These stories are about fatherless childhood and youth. The fatherlessness is not literal; rather, fathers always stay within the domestic household, silent and timid, like decorations in space but not in time. These fathers do not hold authority or the power of castration, but instead seem to be the remains of historical castration. In the film *The Boys from Fengkuei*, the father is a mindless zombie. In the film *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, the father is always sitting at his desk alone and speechless, finally dying there. The father who married into his wife's family and therefore was kept quiet and humble in the film *Dust in the Wind* (1986) has been reconceived as the self-consciously political writer and interpreter in the film *A Borrowed Life* (1994) by its director Wu Nien-Jen, based on his own life story. And yet although Hou's films often portray protagonists who are in a sense fatherless, the sons do not fall in love with their mothers either. Most of Hou's films show prematurely weathered mothers under the heavy burden of daily chores and worries – mothers who

cannot perform the duties of the fathers in dealing with their sons. The present 'absence' of the father from Hou's films cannot be explained in terms of psychoanalysis, but rather can only be explained in terms of the family genealogy that has been severed by historical violence. Therefore, the prominent presence of the grandparents in the domestic scenes of these films represents fragments of history, not bridges between memory and history. The young men in Hou's early films grow up alone, struggling with innocence and awkwardness and finally reconciling with fruitless love. Unlike European psychoanalytic narrative models of coming of age, the fatherless childhood and fruitless love in Hou's films are not obstacles to youth and growth. The protagonist is reconciled to his fate after an outburst of despair at the end of the film *The Boys from Fengkuei*; in the film *Dust in the Wind* the protagonist, after silently weeping over his heartbreak, returns to his family in the mountains, puts on the clothes made by his former lover, passes by his mother napping on a Japanese mat, and chats with his aging grandfather about the weather and the harvest. Nevertheless, on the symbolic level, what chokes off the narrative voice of Hou's coming-of-age tales is the coming of age itself. Once Hou's protagonist becomes an adult, he faces a world that cannot tolerate him and a world to which he no longer belongs. He faces wholly negative and murderous social forces.

Looking beyond the historical events narrated in several of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films, perhaps we can situate his film writing within a certain male double pattern. On one side we find a restless youth growing up without parental guidance, and on the other side we find an adult man, mature, faithful, and socially responsible. But the former has never formed any relationship with the latter. Rather, the latter seems to be the ideal persona or the mirroring idol of the former. This idol reflects aspects of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's own life experience, with added traces of martial-arts fiction and cops-and-robbers films. In a sense, this idol serves as a

bearer of history and a ghost of history; he represents both historical continuity and discontinuity. Even within the film narrative, the idol is shown as a heroic man out of place in his time. In the film *A City of Sadness*, the idol is older brother Wenxiong who takes part in historical events but dies before the start of the bloody new age. In the film *Good Men, Good Women*, Zhong Haodong tries to carry the historic burden but ends like a structural absentee. In the same film, Ah Wei remains a vivid presence after his death. In current metropolitan society, the idol cannot take the center stage even for a moment: he remains a marginalized man. Such examples can be found among the protagonists Lin Xiaoxiang (in the film *Daughters of the Nile*), Ah Wei (in the film *Good Men, Good Women*), and Gao (in the film *Goodbye South, Goodbye*). The idol is murdered many times in Hou's later films by various opponents: the good, the bad, the underworld, or the government. In the film *Taipei Story* (1985; a film for which Hou helped to get funding, was involved in the screenplay writing and even played a character), Hou himself plays a part in the concluding death scene: in the shadow of the abandoned black-and-white screen, Ah Long quietly dies at a garbage dumpster, along with his long forgotten glory and dream. The scene wordlessly replays the cruelty of historical exile.

Hou's writing style is especially apparent in this scene: he likes to write about the ups and downs of grand social and human dramas, but he tries to avoid depicting great historical events directly. The deep and sad memories of tragic historic moments surface momentarily in the retelling of the events by others years later, as the long echoes of history in life. Hou Hsiao-Hsien once said, 'The world is not so dark or decadent. During times of drastic change, people have no choice over the course of their lives. Death and parting from family and friends are as inevitable as the running river' (Hou 1998). This philosophy is the basis of Hou's charming narrative style, and indeed it differs from Euro-American philosophy. At the same time, it exposes a certain historical symptom: in Taiwan under the cold-War

martial law, events of social conflict were kept out of public sight, hidden deep in silence. Hou's use of long camera shots and depth of field in his films have been discussed by many film critics. These techniques not only form the narrative rhythm of slow and lyrical motion in Hou's films, but also the narrative distance within his films. However, such a distance is not an observation from afar, not transcendental withdrawal, but a persistent gaze with softened pain. It is introspection of introspection and layered distances. Hou's stance resembles a stance taken by the mainland writer Shen Congwen, who chose silence as a way of refusing to accept the historical changes in China in the late 1940s and 1950s. Hou's pure and original film language therefore reflects another historical identity: it is more than an identification with the nation-state; it is an individualized gesture in dealing with historical trauma.

Although Hou's early films seem to tell the stories of individuals and even of himself, many of them have an omnipresent narrator. The off-screen narrator, commonly in the form of diaries and letters in female voices, add alternative perspectives to the main narrative lines of these stories, mainly about men. In Hou's films, the structural rhythms are reflected not only in the use of the long shot, but also in the prolonged lingering after the conclusion of the plots. The long anti-climaxes toward the ends of the films depart from the traditional narrative format and violate the rules of classical film making. The ending of a love affair does not stop the growth of the protagonists in Hou's films, and even the death of the protagonists does not close the curtain on history or on the story. For instance, at the end of the film *A City of Sadness*, behind Wenxiong and Wenqing, we can hear Kuanmei's voice reading aloud her letter, retelling her farewell to Wenqing and reporting the growth of the children. The camera fixes its long shot on a wide-angle view of the repeated domestic scene of the Lin family eating dinner together under a lamp in the evening. It shows not just the empty seat at the head of the table symboliz-

ing the historical trajectory of a clan in the realist epic tradition but, more importantly, it shows by way of the young people in the shadowy background who keep getting up to refill their rice bowls that life goes on after a catastrophe. The young generation will grow up in another time and perhaps have its own interesting stories to tell. It is in such gaps and suspensions that Hou Hsiao-Hsien silently conveys the stunning truth of life and history.

Toward history and away from history

A City of Sadness is undoubtedly a landmark in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's filmmaking. Not only does it begin a very important, perhaps the most important of his film series – the Taiwan trilogy – it also touches on a part of Taiwan's history that had been suppressed by the KMT government for decades. Released at the time when martial law was lifted in Taiwan, *A City of Sadness* lifted the curtain of taboo covering the great scar in Taiwan's history: February 28, 1947, when the KMT government killed thousands of civilians in order to put down an uprising. It is in fact the first Taiwan film in the post-Cold War construction and deconstruction of the nation-state narrative.

Lin Wenqing, a major character in the film, reveals a subtle but culturally significant feature of the position of the film narrator. Deaf and mute, Lin is a moving and meaningful character in the film, and is played by the Hong Kong actor Leung Chiu Wai. Lin's muteness could indicate the silenced part of the official Taiwan history. His muteness was a result of his deafness, which isolates him from the space of sound and from historical time. He did not hear the radio broadcast of the surrender statement by the Japanese Emperor; nor did he hear the radio broadcast by Chen Yi (the Governor-General of Taiwan) on the day of February 28, 1947, the patriotic song 'Songhua River,' nor the gunshots from the prisons. He did not hear people's arguments and complaints, nor indeed any of the conversations the film parades before us in the Minnan dialect, the Guangdong dialect, the

Shanghai dialect, Mandarin, and Japanese. In a very interesting scene in the film, when Kuanrong and his friends are talking loudly about political affairs, Wenqing's wife Kuanmei walks to Wenqing who is quietly sitting at a corner. Kuanmei writes down for Wenqing the words of the song playing on the gramophone. The two of them pen a written conversation about the happy events of their childhood. The sunlight through the window cuts a bright section on the screen and situates the two in a loving and personal space, marking them off from the tragic historical moment. Similarly, during a midnight scene, a messenger comes to deliver the news that Kuanrong has died and the rebels' base has been destroyed. Wenqing holds the picture frame tightly. Kuanmei leans against him, afraid to wake up their young son. In a corner of the screen, the family helplessly awaits the approaching historical catastrophe.

In contrast to the main characters of the film, such as the strong man Wenxiong and the idealist Kuanrong, Wenqing was involved in history involuntarily. Rather than being an active participant, the mute Wenqing serves as a witness to the historical tempests. He faces historical reality, but he cannot or will not get involved. In the flight scene, the passing train in the foreground shadows Wenqing's family on the platform in the background. There is a symbolic relation between the narrative of *A City of Sadness* and history itself: Taiwan native history, which is also Cold War history. The role of Wenqing is connected to the narrative action of the film, but his profession as a photographer is not a way for the film to refer to its own filming. In the film, the most effective historical action by Wenqing is to express certain final messages: from prison, he writes to his wife and son, 'You have to live with honor. Your father is innocent.' 'Alive I leave my country; upon death I return to my country. Life and death are determined by Fate; I don't have any thoughts or worries.' He writes to his friends: 'Don't tell my family. When I am dead, I belong to the beautiful future of my country.' Wenqing passes on his last will, but his will

cannot be executed. If we can say that a legacy is also a debt, then Wenqing (or the film text) cannot pay the debt. *A City of Sadness* has revealed another kind of history and at the same time it has written a legacy that has been sealed by blood. By revisiting the legacy, the debt, the film has opened a magic box of the unknown.

The position of Wenqing in *A City of Sadness* resembles the structural position of many female characters in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. In fact, the male 'he' represents another axis in Hou's film series. Starting from the film *Daughters of the Nile* (1987), Hou Hsiao-Hsien turns his eyes from a fishing village at the foot of the mountains, strange small towns, a lonely train station, and a fatherless son's comings and goings, to the hustle-and-bustle life of the metropolitan cities. Over the course of his film career, his protagonists also change from lonely youths and hot-blooded men to drifting and wandering young women. The young girl becomes Hou's main narrator and recorder of events. Women in Hou's films are the survivors of disasters. 'She' travels through the glass wall of the presence of sealed history. However, in the few films where women are the main protagonists, such as *Daughters of the Nile*; *Good Men, Good Women* (1995); *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998); *Millennium Mambo* (2001); and *Coffee Jikou* (2004), female protagonists are all alone in their struggles against the ghostly impact of history and memory in the metropolis. If we say that the 'present absence' in Hou's films means the hidden presence of history, then with the arrival of female protagonists or female narrators, the present and the city also mean the escape from the history – except in *Flowers of Shanghai*.

Good Men, Good Women, the last film in Hou's Taiwan trilogy, is his most structurally complicated film up to this point. Unlike the other two films in the trilogy, *Good Men, Good Women* reaffirms a certain historical absence and escape, instead of representing or even calling for the presence of history. The film follows historical events antecedent to the historical events in *A City*

of *Sadness* and parallel to the historical timeline in *The Puppetmaster*, which depicts Taiwanese grassroots life under Japanese rule. In *Good Men, Good Women*, the narrative line of revolutionary leftist resistance against the Japanese rule is almost non-existent. The part of Taiwan history in which the leftist patriotic young people went to mainland China to join the resistance against the Japanese invasion in the late 1930s and early 1940s appears as a film within the film: we see rehearsals, scenes from the film, and cosmetic makeup photos. In the closed 'present,' Liang Qing, a young urban woman character in Hou's film who plays a role in the film within the film, waits alone and endlessly for the camera to start rolling. Liang Qing tries to get close to the model for her role in the film, a woman called Jiang Biyu from a bygone era. Over Liang Qing's whisper, a few brief cruel and absurd historical scenes are shown in the secondary film. Between the noisy present and the history that Liang Qing is attempting to call back and enter alone is a dimming light and a great gap. Liang herself lives in the memory of yesterday: the telephone rings, but when the phone is picked up, there is no sound at the other end; Liang Qing's stolen diary is faxed through her fax machine – these are like ghosts that cannot be driven away, like an old wound that will not stop bleeding, reminding her of her betrayed dead lover and the time in which Liang struggles to forget about him. When Liang Qing finally meets Jiang Biyu, it is not at a historical moment, but at the occasion of death, the final departure and separation. When Liang Qing, speaking into the silent telephone, calls out the name of her dead lover Ah Wei and sings songs of heartbroken love, she thereby arrives at a moment parallel to a moment in Jiang Biyu's life. Jiang, a woman of great composure, broke down and wept bitterly over her executed husband's body. The one meeting between Liang and Jiang, at the latter's funeral, is merely an occasion for the display of personal pain, women's pain, the despair of the survivors of catastrophe, and wounds that cannot be healed.

Hou's Taiwan trilogy violates political taboos and shows a rift in history and emotion. The historical structure and memory of half a century of the Japanese occupation in Taiwan marks the difference in emotional structures between the mainland and Taiwan. During the second half of the twentieth century, the KMT government stayed in Taiwan and practiced martial law for several decades of white terror, successfully eliminating both the Chinese and the indigenous Taiwanese leftist social and cultural tradition. In other words, even though both the Taiwanese new wave films and the mainland Chinese fifth-generation films were made during the same global post-Cold War situation, and for a time the film people from both sides of the Taiwan Straits formed a kind of blood-is-thicker-than-water network, the oceanic political gap deeply informed the filmmaking on both sides. The fact that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films cannot deal with certain features of 'Chinese' history is an effect not just of the spatial distance between Taiwan and the mainland, but also of the psychological distance. Even if one repudiates the Cold-War conception of red China as a 'strange beast,' even after the beast has dissipated into dust, one can still feel the shadowy hole left by its absence. At the beginning of the 1980s, both sides launched art films. However, just when Hou's films began their political intervention, the fifth-generation film directors were abandoning the function of social criticism. If we say that Hou's Taiwan trilogy shows traces of the Cold War in its structural gaps, the mainland Chinese films at the turn of the 21st century toy with the 'red ghost' of cold-war history and memory. As both sides of the Taiwan Straits become more involved in globalization and in regional conflicts and restructurings, the shadow and ghost will surely recur constantly in the texts and societies of these two places.

Perhaps, in a way, *Flowers of Shanghai* is no exception. For the first time, Hou set a film on the mainland, and for the first time he planned to film on the mainland. But in reaching 'China', he departed from it on another level, for the film shows the absence

of China's culture. In the words of Scott Tobias, an international film critic, Hou's film *Flowers of Shanghai* 'creates a beguiling world unto itself, sealed off from all other worlds, real or cinematic ... what remains is a succession of tableaux so vividly realized in purely cinematic terms that the emotions seem to waft from the screen like smoke' (Tobias 2006). In Hou's own words, 'To me, China is the origin of Taiwan culture. But I do not mean contemporary mainland China, that concrete entity separated politically from Taiwan. When I was young, I was educated in classical Chinese, reading classical masterpieces and classical poetry. Later I liked reading classical martial art novels and classical drama. These Chinese classics have formed the background of my life and the basis for all of my creative works. But classical China is entirely different from contemporary mainland China' (Hou 1998). Indeed, *Flowers of Shanghai* used long shots and an immobile camera to make a splendid display of late Qing interior decoration, achieving a dreamy and yet claustrophobic effect. During the 1980s and 1990s, both Taiwan and Hong Kong filmmakers adopted the strategy of avoiding the red (communist) period of mainland China by using the period between late Qing and the 1940s as the entry point of their narratives on China. But the filming process of *Flowers of Shanghai* revealed a deeper symptom: because of difficulties about permission to film in mainland China, *Flowers of Shanghai*, which was scheduled to be filmed in Shanghai, had to be finished indoors in Taiwan. The scenes of Hou Road and the Qian family residence have disappeared in the completed film; but the end-of-film screen still credits 'Qian Zigang played by Xie Xian,' reflecting the anticipated but unrealized arrival on the mainland. In the film, people rush to the window to look at the non-existent Hou Road. The scene is like a reversal of the famous picture on Zhang Ailing's book cover, where a modern person is outside the window looking in at a domestic scene of the late Qing and the beginning of the Republic: here Hou's film portrays a modern China from afar, in a late

Qing building in Taiwan. The revisiting of modern Chinese history has become another flight from history, a failure to bridge the huge gap created by the Cold War.

A few years later, a young woman roaming in metropolitan cities searching for historical traces appears in yet another of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's masterpieces, *Coffee Jikou*. Hou Hsiao-Hsien made this Japanese film to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Japan's famous filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. *Coffee Jikou* has established Hou Hsiao-Hsien as the pre-eminent Asian art film master. However, the fact that Japan remains as the ambiguous Other within Taiwan informs Hou's (non)historical narrative. A thin Hou-style narrative thread links Taiwan, Japan and China, as these three places occupy the real and also the imaginary discursive space in contemporary Taiwan. In the film, a young Japanese woman named Yoko is pregnant with a child by a Taiwanese umbrella merchant. The umbrella merchant has already moved his factory to mainland China. Yoko calmly decides by herself to remain unmarried and be a single mother. The story is not about a marriage between history and reality or about their painful separation. However, many episodes in the film show Yoko looking for biographical material and historical records about a mainland Chinese musician named Jiang Wen. Jiang Wen was born in Taiwan, held a Japanese passport, and died as a Chinese on the mainland. Jiang Wen's life is clearly linked with a turbulent part of Asian history. Yoko meticulously traces the trail that Jiang Wen left in Taiwan, Japan and mainland China; but she never wishes to arrive at an understanding of history, let alone to participate in history. The traces that Yoko can find are only the physical places where Jiang Wen spent his days, some existing only as landmarks recorded on old maps. Even those traces are sunk deep in historical dust. The figures once alive in history have all become ghosts lingering in the sediments of history, unable to form concrete shapes. Even though Yoko may not have recovered any fragments of history, she may have come to understand

the story of time itself, encapsulated in the film's final image of a train going through a dark tunnel.

Once again, caught in the struggle between history and reality, Hou Hsiao-Hsien has returned to himself, temporarily suspending the long march into the hinterland of history and reality.

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Special terms

- A Borrowed Life* 多桑
A City of Sadness 悲情城市
A Time to Live, A Time to Die 童年往事
Coffee Jikou 咖啡時光
Daughters of the Nile 尼羅河的女兒
Dust in the Wind 戀戀風塵
 films about the native land 鄉土電影
Good Men, Good Women 好男好女
One and Eight 一個和八個
The Boys from Fengkuei 風柜來的人
The Puppetmaster 戲夢人生
 Yasujiro Ozu 小津安二郎

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