

Article**Italo Spinelli****A Glimpse at Taiwanese Cinema**

Taiwan is an island 400 km long and 144 km wide, densely populated by about 24 million inhabitants, called by Portuguese sailors Formosa, 'the beautiful' for its nature. The landscape ranges from the mountains of volcanic origin, to the surrounding sea, and the many different landscapes all around its coasts. The population is composed of various ethnic groups, with a majority of Taiwanese natives and Chinese immigrants in great part from the southern coast of mainland China, distant only 180 km.

In the first part of the last century Taiwan was a Japanese colony, following the first Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) when China, then ruled by the Qing Dynasty, was defeated by Japan and forced to cede the island of Taiwan, a pearl of a colony on the outskirts of the Japanese empire, where cinema played an important role in the colonial project to assimilate the Taiwanese population into the empire. From Tokyo came the military organization, the values, to be respected, the customs and traditions,

the language and the education to be adopted together with the construction of new buildings.

From 1905 in the capital Taipei, in full colonial urbanization, the first theaters-halls were built. The Dao-Dao-Cheng Hall began to operate in 1921, and in 1924 the Yong-Le-Zuo opened and began to program regular films and it is still showing films in Di-Hua Street.

The first projection of a film (in Japanese) was in 1901. Japanese silent films were translated and interpreted into Taiwanese by 'film narrators' in the manner of Japanese 'benshi'. Audiences came to the screenings to see the same films narrated by different benshi (literally, "commentators") and to hear different interpretations of the first silent film stars.

When the Sino-Japanese conflict resumed in 1937, which lasted until the end of World War II and is considered the greatest Asian conflict of the 20th century, all Taiwanese and Asian film markets

monopolized by Tokyo were banned from showing American and Chinese films.

In 1945, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, the Japanese left the island and Taiwan became part of the Republic of China (ROC) under the control of the nationalist government, led by the military leader of the Kuomintang (KMT) Chiang Kai Shek.

The civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party, Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued with alternating phases until the end of the 1940s. In 1948, the Kuomintang government instituted martial law and abolished political parties. In 1949 disaffected nationalists on the mainland, one and a half million people including 600,000 military personnel, retreated to Taiwan, the only territory left under the control of the Republic of China (RoC), led by the Kuomintang, while all of mainland China came under the control of the People's Republic of China.

Listening to popular music and puppet theater 'wuxia' (lit. wu = martial and xia = hero) where legends were told of swordsmen or swordswomen who do extra-ordinary things out of love, friendship, and above all out of a sense of justice- puppet theater was very popular in the 1920s- one senses the attempt by local intellectuals to a genuine native culture by making the puppets, who twirl in weightless acrobatics, the heroes of the very first films. The first successful adaptation from a wuxia work to film was Yung Ling's *Burning of the Red Lotus Monastery* in 1928, featuring acrobatic and primitive duels and special effects.

With the advent of the Korean War in 1950, the Taiwanese government of KMT, under American tutelage, in the forefront of the global anti-communist struggle, instituted a campaign of violent political repression in which hundreds of Taiwanese civilians lost their lives, secret arrests were the order of the day, interrogations and executions of suspected opponents marked that period as 'White Terror'. Martial law remained in effect for 38 years. Taiwan entered a new film era in 1949 when the focus of Chinese film production shifted from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The nationalist government, in an effort to establish a film industry,

created the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), organized and controlled by the Kuomintang.

From 1955 'communism, pornography and violent stories' were censored and banned. In the same year, in an attempt to curb communist China's propaganda cinema, the CMPC opened its own film studios with a wide range of exotic films, no taxation and all the facilities for Hong Kong productions that made films in Cantonese and Mandarin, competitive with the mainland Chinese market. The films go from co-productions to 'domestic production' for the Taiwanese government.

Lin Tuan-chiu was born in colonial Taiwan, as a young man he loved theater, he moved to Japan for his studies in 1942 where he graduated from the University of Tokyo, and then found a job as a trainee at the famous Toho Studios, a theater and film production company (where the great Japanese directors Ozu, Mizoguchi and Akira Kurosawa worked).

Lin, returned to Taiwan in 1943 and became one of the first Taiwanese directors with practical studio experience. The Nationalist Party had imposed Mandarin as the official language on the island and this created many problems for the producers of films in Cantonese. In the meantime, a minor industry had developed in Hong Kong, producing films in the 'Amoy' dialect, similar to Taiwanese. From this success, a number of film producers invested in the construction of independent film studios, marking the rise of a dual history of Taiwanese cinema.

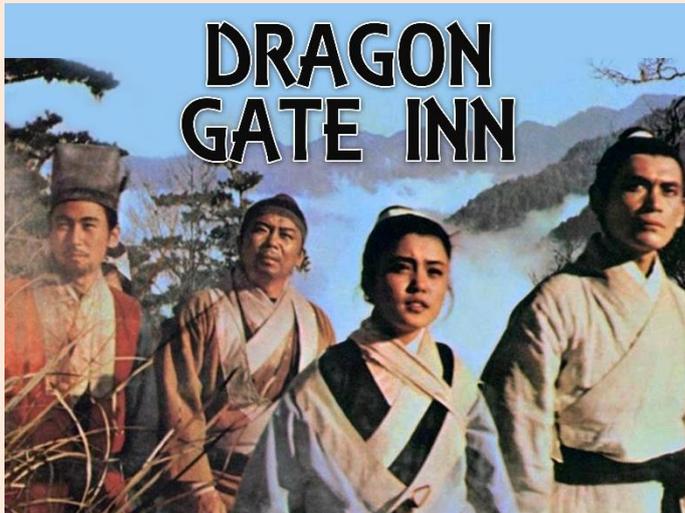


Lin's *The Husband's Secret* (1960), became one of the first popular films most beloved by the island's audiences. In the prosperous film industry of the early 1960s, wuxia martial arts cinema was accompanied by genres of realist, melodrama, and

fantasy cinema. Popular dramas such as *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* (1969) by the prolific Hsin Chi, who had also worked in the theater in Japan during the colonial period. The film describes middle-class characters, showing with out-of-studio shots, flashes of the urban development of Taipei.

These Taiyuan (Taiwanese language) films, which remained unknown for decades, have now been unearthed thanks to restoration by the Taiwan Film Institute.

Hu Jinquan, known by the pseudonym King Hu, a prestigious director, born in Beijing, emigrated to Hong Kong and is considered one of the greatest authors and creators of the success of Hong Kong wuxia cinema. He achieved fame with the film *Come Drink with Me*, a classic of the wuxia genre starring a woman. In 1966 he moved to Taiwan where he made the great wuxia successes, box-office hits of the entire Southeast Asia, cult films such as *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967) and *Touch of Zen* (1970) followed by other box-office hits such as *Raining in the Mountain* (1979).



In 1967 film production reached 257 films, counting also on Hong Kong productions supported with facilities and subsidies, placing Taiwan in third place in Asia, after Japan and India, for the quantity of films produced.

In 1971 Taiwan was expelled from the United Nations in favor of the People's China. In 1972 diplomatic relations with Japan were interrupted and in 1975 Chiang Kai-Shek died. In 1979 the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and withdrew their military bases from the island and Taiwan entered a phase of diplomatic isolation: but not its cinema.

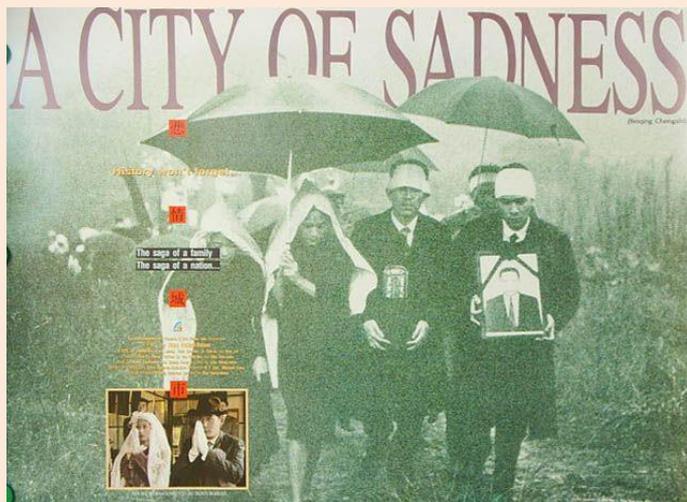
The government decided to use cinema as a diplomatic weapon and the CMCP renewed itself by recruiting young writers, screenwriters and filmmakers. The first production was an episodic film *In our time* (1981) considered the manifesto of the new Taiwanese cinema. Four stories, directed by Tao Dechen, Edward Yang, Ko Yi-cheng and Zhang Ye starting from 1967, retrace the recent evolution of Taiwan. Two years later, CMCP produced another episodic film, *The Sandwich Man* (1983), directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Zeng Zhuangxian and Wan Jen, that marked the birth of the New Wave of Taiwanese cinema.



Edward Yang, born in Shanghai, returned after eleven years in the United States as a computer engineer and broke into Taiwanese cinema, focusing on the chaotic urbanization of the island and the consequent alienation of the new generation (*Taipei Story*, 1985) and *The Terrorisers* (1986). He soon became a cult director of the first generation of new wave directors with whom he shared a quest to document history and changes in society. Later he directed *A Brighter Summer day* (1990) an evocation of one's childhood built around a crime story that took place in the 1960s. His international consecration came at the Cannes Festival where his movie *Ye Ye* (2000) is awarded with Director's Prize.

Hou Hsiao Hsien, who was born in the north-east of the Guangdong province (formerly Canton), plunges into the exploration of personal memory. In 1983, with *The Boys of Feng Kuei*, his first auteur film, all the characteristics of his unmistakable style manifested themselves, the study of the different planes in the frames, the empty spaces so central to his aesthetics, the editing by ellipsis. The film, with non-professional actors, recreates the years of his adolescence. Boys, before their military service,

discovering Kaoshung, the big city, where they look for work, join gangs, meet girls they love and then abandon.



In his films, he revisited the Japanese colonial period of the first half of the last century, in particular in *A time to live, a time to die* (1985) where the family history is intertwined with the drama of the Chinese in exile in Taiwan after 1949; with *A City of Sadness* (1989) the Taiwanese New Wave obtained international recognition with the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival (the first Chinese film to win a prize in Venice) followed by *The Puppetmaster* (1993), Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1994 he made *Good Men, Good Women*, a film focused on the period of the 'White Terror'.

In the same year, Wan-Jen's *Super Citizen Ko* (1994) made its enter in cinemas. As Peggy Chiao wrote: “*The two works depart from a linear narrative, adopting complicated points of view developed by the psyche of the first person narrator. Between memory and the present, the stories of different generations cross each other, moved by new sensibilities, trying to represent and understand one of the saddest and most shocking passages, until then considered a taboo in recent political history*”.

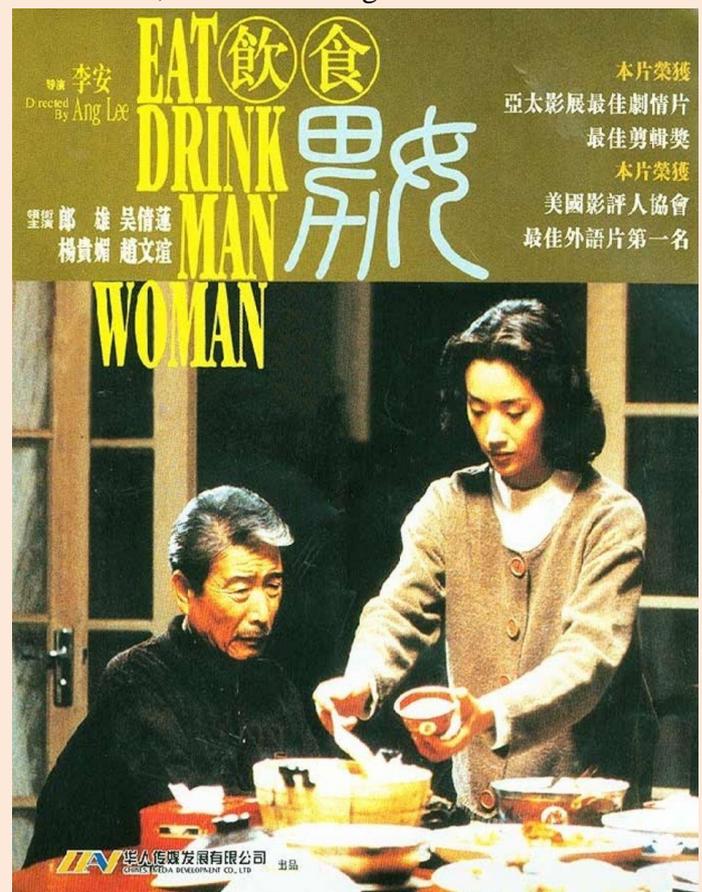
Peggy Chiao successfully promoted the Taiwanese New Wave of the 1980s and strongly contributed to their international marketing playing multiple roles as critic, producer and marketing planner.

It would be almost twenty years before that dark period of the island's history, first exposed in New Wave Taiwan, resurfaces in a surprising and unexpected way in the debut feature of Hsu John,

director of *Detention* (2019) where the horror of the 'White Terror' is the backdrop for a horror thriller based on a successful new generation video game.

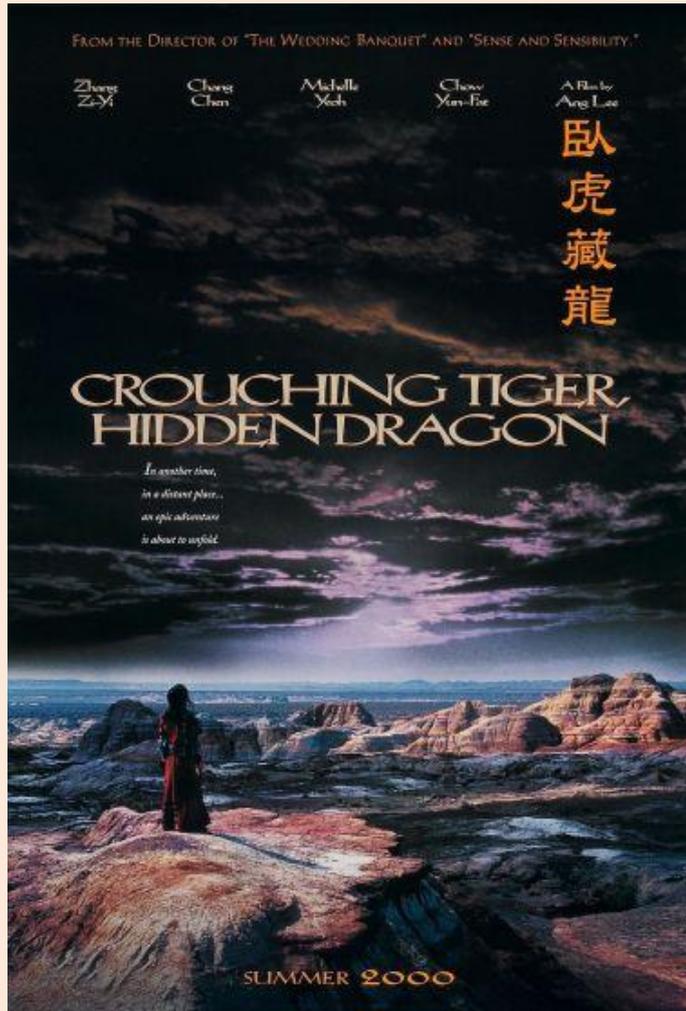
The CMPC between 1994 and 1995 scores another achievement in the affirmation of internationally recognized and appreciated Taiwanese cinema, starting in the 1980s and continuing into the following decade.

Another Taiwanese filmmaker who studied in New York, where he lives, Ang Lee, became known for his transnational, multicultural works; in particular, *The Wedding Banquet*, (1993) the story of a young Taiwanese homosexual who lives in New York and tries to avoid scandalizing his family with a fake marriage. The CMCP convinced director Ang Lee to shoot in Taiwan, producing his third film *Eat Drink Man Women* (1994) about the relationship between a widowed head chef and his three unmarried daughters. Between comedy and melodrama, the film was a great success in Taiwan.



Ang Lee continued his career between Hollywood and China. In love since childhood with the cinema of King Hu, the undisputed master of the wuxia genre, Ang Lee with Hong Kong and Taiwan megastars seduced audiences around the world with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000),

inaugurating the new millennium of Taiwanese cinema with 4 Oscars.



The great success of the film does not involve CMPC as much as Taiwanese pride.

One of the last films produced by the CMPC is *The River* (1997) by another leading exponent of the second new wave, Tsai Ming Liang, one of the most innovative authors of Taiwanese cinema and not only; among his acclaimed films is *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, a tribute to King Hu. In recent years, he was actively involved in trans-disciplinary artistic creations, with his renowned non-narrative short video and installation work shown in many museums all over the world.

Since the abolition of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has embarked on a new course, with the first democratic elections in 1996. Taiwan is now less isolated diplomatically and no longer needs cinema as an ambassador.

The years 1986 - 1990, prior to and after the lifting of martial law, is regarded as the most important for non-mainstream media outlet. A group of filmmakers called “Green team”, with early video

cameras, with their legacy of 3.000 hours of footage, documented the waves of social movements, including political, environmental, farmers, labour, indigenous and Chinese mainland veteran movements. During the period, they broke through the news blackout by mainstream media, inspiring younger generations. In a way the Green Team has been the origin of contemporary Taiwanese documentaries.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the works of Edward Yang, Tsa Ming Liang and Ang Lee were produced with international funding, Japanese, French and American. Hou Hsiao hsien creates his own production company, supporting young filmmakers. With their ability to evoke Taiwanese history, these filmmakers have shown the way to other filmmakers, equipped with a new imagery capable of facing the challenges of a world in profound transformation. A new generation from Malaysia or Myanmar born, like Midi Z, who moved to Taiwan at the age of sixteen, for his documentary and features such as *Return to Burma* (2011), *Ice poison* (2014) and more recently *Nina wu* (2019) has been regularly invited by international film festival to represent Taiwanese cinema.

A plurality of young talents today explore themes linked to the contemporary world of a free democratic and multi-ethnic Taiwan, with its capital, Taipei, which has become an Asian metropolis, a crossroads of epochs, including architecturally diverse ones. The youth audience brings to the success films that face issues related to adolescence. With the debut of *Cape No.7* by Wei Te-sheng, a kind of romantic drama set between the Japanese colonial period and the present, and with *Wind of September* by Lin Shu-yu, a straightforward film, on adolescent risks and challenges, unprecedented for Taiwanese cinema, both produced in 2008, brought the national cinema back to box-office success. The newfound Taiwanese vitality and originality returns to be rewarded at home and abroad.

Chung Mong-hong reveals himself among the most interesting directors with *The fourth portrait* (2010) and *Soul* (2013). His latest feature *A sun* (2019) on Netflix, like many other Taiwanese film, is favorite among cinephiles for this year's

Oscar race in the best international feature film category.



The new generation of directors are recipients of domestic and international awards such as Lin Shu-yu's *The Garden of the Evening Mist* (2019), which garners awards and great acclaim in the three Chinas.

Many filmmakers devoted themselves with renewed vitality to documentary filmmaking, becoming the critical voice of the country, facing the issues of minorities, ecological battles, revisiting with a lucid and rigorous look at the past, the dramatic experiences of parents and grandparents in the history of anti-communist terror that have crossed the whole of Southeast Asia, as in *Bouluomi* (2019) by Lau Kek-huat, a director of Malaysian origin, who moved from documentary filmmaking to his first fiction feature film.

The relationship with Beijing, while remaining tense, has experienced ups and downs, a fluctuating flow, in which Taiwanese cinema has represented the autonomy of the island, an unresolved reality, projected towards a future yet to be discovered.

■ *Mr. Italo Spinelli is a Filmmaker, Theater Director and Founder Director of the Asiatica Film Festival, Rome.*