

Chapter Ten

Commentary on the Marginalized Society: The Films of Tsai Ming-Liang

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The new Taiwan cinema movement attracted world attention in the early 1980s, led by the first wave filmmakers, such as, Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang (Yang Dechang), who successfully constructed and developed an indigenous Taiwanese cinema that reflects Taiwan's history, colonial past, social transformation, and contemporary cultural growth. Their narratives often dealt with the struggle of the working and peasant classes against deprivation and misery. In the 1980s, almost every film tried to reconstruct images of the past to some extent – namely, the transformation of Taiwanese society between the 1940s and 1970. These new directors, partially influenced by identity politics, were also moved to return to native and regional cultures and languages. As a result, multiple dialects – Mandarin, Taiwanese and Hakka – are often incorporated in their films.

In the 1990s, the first wave of filmmakers was followed by a new group of 'Second Wave' filmmakers. However, the Second Wave developed a different form. These directors were no longer interested in Taiwan's past history; they were mostly concerned with their present-day capitalist globalized metropolitan culture. Taipei became a major thematic concern prevalent in Taiwanese films in the 1990s. It played a key role in the construction of contemporary Taiwanese experiences rather than simply serving as a narrative background.

The most representative director during this period is Tsai Ming-Liang who often paints a very critical picture of Taipei. In his first five feature films, Taipei is portrayed mostly as an alienating, superficial, disjointed and impersonal modern globalized city, where people care only for money and are emotionally starved. Tsai said in production notes to *The Hole* (Dong, 1998):

The image of the 21st century that drifted out of my eyes was one of unending rain . . . I think the world environment, particularly that of Asia, was destroyed in the 20th century. Whether I am in Taiwan or in the country of my birth, Malaysia, I feel that the situation is at its most serious in these two developing countries. Why am I so pessimistic? If you live in Taiwan, you will naturally feel pessimism. We paid a heavy price for the take-off of Taiwan's economy over the past ten years. People have to live with crime and violence, political conflict and corruption, the serious pollution of the environment, alienation and growing friction in personal relationships. All these are almost permanent fixtures of people's lives. The most serious problem, I believe, is the sense of anxiety and insecurity in people and their loss of confidence and trust in the government. Therefore I think the future will be fraught with suspicion and tragedy. (<http://www.cs.mu.oz.au/~peteg/zine/toto/tsai.htm>)

As Tsai often admits, his films demonstrate his 'observation of the society, which closely relates to the economic prosperity and environmental changes in Taipei' (Jiao, 1997, p. 55). Tsai's production notes, indeed, express his great concerns for the social, cultural and environmental changes in the postmodern society of Taipei in the aftermath of the 1990s economic miracle. Particularly, he is concerned about Taipei's under class and marginalized people, those who are left out or underprivileged by globalization.

Tsai's films are portraits of marginalized people who live in an over crowded metropolis. Their physical being and mental consciousness are imprisoned in the city and are unable to rise above the fast pace of modernization – accompanied by heavy economic pressures resulting from globalization and the island's economic success. Consequently, they choose to live in isolation and meaninglessly in the city. They exhibit pain and anguish amidst sexual pleasure, while the acquisition and consumption of modern luxuries do not bring them any contentment. These are portraits of aimless Taipei youths, who either live alone or in disconnected families with parents – likewise dysfunctional – in Taipei's low-income, marginalized community. Young people, who are lonely, some even homeless, are incapable of communicating with others, and can barely subsist, whether by selling urn space in a columbarium, peddling watches in the busy Ximending District, or selling designer Hong Kong clothes illegally in Taipei night markets. And also, portraits of parents who are either unemployed or making their living by driving a taxi or operating a restaurant elevator.

I.C. Jarvie, author of *Movie as Social Criticism*, states that 'Popular movies are a rich source of ideas about, information (to be sure, misinformation also) concerning, and criticism of, society' (Jarvie, 1978, p. iv). Through his films, Tsai Ming-Liang documents, informs, criticizes and exposes the lives of those marginalized people with whom he is familiar and shares concern. Moreover, in recent years, the ever-increasing recognition of academic Chinese film studies in universities and colleges has confirmed that scholars perceive film as a social commentary and a medium that reflects the reality and exposes truths of society. Through the study of stories

and imageries of films, students explore how Chinese films have reflected and responded to radical social, economic, and political changes in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. They tackle issues as broad as globalization, as personal as family relationships, and as intimate and controversial as sexuality. Tsai Ming-Liang's films should be required screening on lists and syllabuses for Chinese film studies. For Tsai's films connect with the society – particularly in the way he portrays the views and values of the culture in Taiwan – and are viewed as a rich source of ideas and criticism of Taipei society. Though Tsai's films often focus on changes happening in Taiwan, especially Taipei, it is evident his concerns extend far beyond the island as he understands that, with economic progress and globalization, Taipei is not alone in suffering from crime and violence, alienation and growing friction in personal relationships, and growing environmental pollution.

A brief history of Taiwanese film and the emergence of New Taiwan Cinema, in the 1980s, prior to Tsai's arrival in Taiwan, will be provided as a background to how he became one of the most promising directors in the 1990s. This chapter, then, discusses the most significant recurrent themes in Tsai's films and his social critiques, which have been recognized by many critics as his unique style and trademark. While discussing these recurrent themes, how his films observe and evaluate human relations and reflect on pressing social issues in the postmodern society of Taipei in the aftermath of the economic miracle of the 1990s will be discussed.

Contemporary Evolution of Taiwanese Films

Prior to Taiwan New Cinema of the 1980s

The history of Taiwan film began shortly after the Japanese took over the island. In July 1900, a Japanese timber import merchant in Taipei invited a projectionist from Japan to show French documentary films, which was the first time Taiwanese people in Taipei saw any type of film (Ye, 1995, p. 3). For the first 20 years, only Japanese documentaries and Japanese feature films were produced and allowed to be shown in Taiwan. The restriction of producing only Japanese language film in Taiwan is seen as one of the measures taken by the Japanese government to assimilate the Taiwanese. In order to keep the colonial structure intact, no Taiwanese actor was allowed in films produced in Taiwan until 1922, when Liu Xiyang, a Taiwanese bank clerk, was given a leading role in a Japanese feature film called *The Eyes of the Buddha* (*Da fo de tong kong*) and became the first Taiwanese actor in the history of Taiwanese film.

Beginning in 1925, an integrated film industry gradually formed using Taiwanese talent and capital. The Taiwanese made ten feature films in collaboration

with the Japanese. The content of these movies focused predominately on propagating Japanese militarism. The film industry was interrupted in 1937 by the Sino-Japanese war; consequently, virtually nothing was produced until after the Nationalist government took over Taiwan in 1945.

With the end of the civil war, Chiang Kai-Shek and his government retreated to Taiwan in December 1949 and established Taipei as the provincial capital of the Republic of China. Shanghai filmmakers sympathetic to the Nationalist government also followed Chiang to Taiwan. As Taiwan's economy and society became stabilized in the 1950s, exiled filmmakers from Shanghai, subsidized by the Nationalist government, formed the nexus of a new film industry that produced Mandarin and low-budget Taiwanese dialect films. Mandarin films propagated the development of Taiwan as a free China, and were used as a political tool for the nationalist government to denounce the communist regime of mainland China.

As economic prosperity, industrialization and modernization swiftly expanded in Taiwan from the 1960s through the early 1970s, a genre of 'Healthy and Realistic' melodramas (*Jiankang xieshi pian*), introduced by the government-owned Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), gained popularity. 'Healthy and Realistic' films advocated a positive attitude towards traditional moral values, easing the conflict between socio-economic restructuring and moral-ethical values of the traditional agrarian society. Two other popular genres of the 1960s are Huangmei Tune Musical Operas (*Huangmei diao*) and Knight-Errant (*Wuxiao* a.k.a. *Gongfu*) movies. Although these popular genres reaped great profit for the film industry in the 1960s, their audiences quickly lost interest – due to the films' repetitiveness and lack of originality.

As Taiwan embarked on its economic miracle in the 1970s, its film industry seemed primed to gallop ahead toward the proverbial *cinematic* sunset. By the end of the 1970s, audiences became tired of escapist romance movies, while Gongfu action films fell out of favour overseas, especially in Southeast Asian theatres, because of its sloppy production. Consequently, Taiwan's yearly total production in films slipped from triple to double digits and the industry began to lose its competitiveness, enabling Hong Kong to take over film markets in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, with the advent of home video in the early 1980s, the number of Taiwan films released in theatres dwindled further.

A Changing Society and Taiwan New Cinema in the 1980s

For the people of Taiwan, 1979 through 1989 was a stifling era characterized by unparalleled economic and social progress amidst frequent political change. The most eventful political change came when the United States, in order to extend diplomatic recognition to China, ended its long-standing political relation with

Taiwan on 1 January, 1979, nine months after Chiang Ching-Kuo became president of the Republic of China. Yet in this difficult period, the Taiwanese people stood firm and created an 'economic miracle'. In 1985, due to successful economic reforms in the 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan took its place alongside Singapore, South Korea and Hong Kong as one of the region's four 'dragons'.

In 1987, shortly before his death in January 1988, Chiang Ching-Kuo lifted the Emergency Decree, putting an end to four decades of martial law in Taiwan. Also in November 1987, the ban on travel into mainland China was lifted. As a result, freedom of speech and political activity expanded. Taiwan society became progressively more open and vocal, and its people more actively asserted their unique identity. For Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang, directors of Taiwanese New Wave Cinema, who were both born in the 1950s and reached adulthood under socio-political liberalization, the restoration and re-examination of Taiwan's 'forgotten' historical experience became a critical theme (Lu, 1997).

Unexpected economic success had considerable bearing, too, on social and environmental change in Taiwan. Towards the end of the 1980s, though people in Taiwan enjoyed freedom of speech and wealth never before envisioned, they also faced numerous problems – crises in faith and identity emerged, and a sense of insecurity permeated throughout society.

Amidst the economic and social progress, and political changes, the film industry underwent monumental change in the 1980s. In the early 1980s, the Central Motion Picture Corporation hired a group of young directors and screenwriters, who were well educated in film schools in Taiwan and the United States, to work for them. Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang were hired and trained to be directors, and Tsai Ming-Liang was hired as screenwriter (Li, 1997, p. 188). In 1982, the Corporation backed these two young and unknown directors in two films: *In Our Time* (*Guangyin de gushi*, 1982), directed by Edward Yang, and *Sandwich Man* (*Erzi de dawawanou*, 1983), one of the four episodes of which was directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Although these two films were not box-office hits, they were well received and have been regarded as two of the forerunners of 'Taiwan New Cinema'.

At the time Taiwan New Wave films began entering the international market, the production of local Taiwan films was at a nadir. Hong Kong films dominated the market. In the 1990s, even though the Government Information Office, the agency responsible for overseeing the film industry, began offering grants to promote film production in Taiwan, actual production remained low because filmmakers were not willing to invest capital to shoot films in Taiwan. Instead, investments flowed out to Hong Kong and mainland China. Films like *Farewell My Concubine* and *Raise the Red Lantern* have all been made under the model of 'Taiwan money, Hong Kong skills, and mainland locations'. By the late 1990s, only about 30 films a year were being produced in Taiwan (*Sinorama*, 1 November, 1999), even fewer of which were

actually released in theatres in Taiwan. Films that do play on the big screen typically fall into two categories, either cheap comedies thrown together by the Central Motion Picture Corporation, or serious art films directed by Tsai Ming-Liang, Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang.

Era of Tsai Ming-Liang's Films in the 1990s

In the 1980s, prior to Tsai's era, the first wave of filmmakers presented a rather uniform aesthetic tradition in their films. While recollecting and reconstructing their memories of Taiwan's past and culture in their films, they have reflected an impartial view of the reality. They painted a warm and caring agrarian society in which people abided by Confucian ethics and respected traditional family values and life. In the late 1980s, some directors, including Hou and Yang, began exploring themes based on observance and evaluation of modern urban life in Taiwan, rather than dwelling on the nostalgia of the past. Consequently, a city-based film, also known as *Chengshi dianying*, set in an metropolitan centre, particularly in Taipei, became the main feature and context for the majority of films from Taiwan. Taipei is the genuine protagonist, where marginalized individuals live scattered in every corner of the city. Understanding the contours of Taipei, its social and economic changes, and how its people reside in this society have become an essential function in deciphering the Taiwan films of the 1990s. On the subject of contemporary Taipei and its marginalized people, Tsai Ming-Liang has been considered its key director of the 1990s.

Identity Politics: Mainlanders and Taiwanese

Before reviewing Tsai Ming-Liang's emergence as a key filmmaker, one critical social-political issue that permeates Taiwanese society should be discussed. Taiwanese identity is an extremely complicated subject, often causing taunting arguments, particularly when the sensitive political issue of unification or 'One China, Two Systems' is mentioned. The subject of 'Taiwan identity' is fraught with sensitive political implications, and was taboo until the late 1970s. Closely related is a crucial distinction between native Taiwanese and immigrant Mainlanders – the latter referring to those Chinese exiled to Taiwan at the end of the civil war between the KMT and Communist parties. In Taiwan, the Nationalist government employs administrative procedures requiring identification of one's hometown based on one's father's place of origin. This information is a requisite item on identification cards carried by all persons aged fifteen and over (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 92). Under this policy, children born in Taiwan after 1945 to mainland parents or to mixed parentage are registered as a 'Mainlander'.

Classification, either as Mainlander or Taiwanese, was less problematic in the years immediately following the KMT retreat to Taiwan, as distinctions were fairly obvious, and criteria for labelling a person was rather simple. However, with time, intermarriage, and the births of second and third generations, these distinctions became more difficult to draw and the criteria became increasingly questionable. For the second and third generations of Mainlander offspring, their identities have become an emotional and agonizing issue to deal with. This group complains of exclusion from Taiwanese society because one, or both, of their parents are mainland Chinese. Some even fear that because they are considered by Taiwanese as second generation Mainlanders, they may be persecuted and deprived of their present social standing, if Taiwan-independence advocates ascend to power. Other offspring of Mainlanders, who consider Taiwan their home and espouse belonging via birthright, experience difficulty receiving acceptance as 'Taiwanese' in the eyes of some native Taiwanese people.

No matter how emotional and sensitive the issue is, the so-called Mainlanders and Taiwanese, through living on the same island, breathing the same air, and eating the same foods, for more than 50 years, together have inspired a very unique Taiwanese popular culture, particularly noticeable in the area of language, one of the most common markers of identity. Before 1987, speaking the Taiwanese dialect was a primary marker of being native Taiwanese. To prevent language from becoming a focus for opposition, the Nationalist government promoted Mandarin as the official language in the 1960s and 1970s, and prohibited the teaching of the Taiwanese dialect in schools.

With the passing of time and increasing intermarriage, offspring of Mainlanders were often raised in a bilingual environment. Taiwan, as a society, has become increasingly bilingual, but the Mainlander-Taiwanese conflict, as a social dilemma, has not escaped the attention of filmmakers. Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films provide many examples of these bilingual families. The best example is *City of Sadness* (*Beiqing Chengshi*), which confronts the 28 February Incident of 1947¹ head-on in an unsentimental fashion, bringing out the violent clash of distinct ways of life through the use of Taiwanese, Shanghainese, Mandarin and Japanese languages. Thus, Hou's films set a tradition of using films for social observation and commentary.

Tsai Ming-Liang and His Life in Taiwan

Tsai Ming-Liang, in fact, is not even a Taiwanese. He is an ethnic-Chinese, born and raised in Malaysia, where his grandfather, and later his father, settled. Tsai was born in 1957 in Kuching, Malaysia. A small town meaning 'cat' in Malay, Kuching was a peaceful town with a slow pace of life, where the only leisure activities people had were cinema or radio. Tsai came from a fairly humble family; his father was a farmer

and had a little street-corner stall where he sold noodles to ordinary people in the evenings. When Tsai was little, he had also lived with his maternal grandparents who also owned a noodle shop. One grandparent would take Tsai to movie theatres in the evenings, while the other worked, alternating regularly. For this reason, Tsai often went to the same movie twice. Later, Tsai's grandmother operated a small casino when his grandfather became ill and could no longer provide for the family. Tsai often recalled his grandmother as a small, but very strong-willed, and extremely tough woman.

Spending his free time accompanying his grandparents to the movies, Tsai's cinema education began at a very young age by watching Hollywood-style films, Hong Kong films in Cantonese, and Taiwan films in Taiwanese. After graduating from high school, Tsai became a bit of a gigolo, with long hair and flared trousers. Tsai's father, worried about his education in Malaysia, decided to send him to Taiwan to ensure that his son would turn out 'all right', because the education system there was known to be disciplined and strict.

Tsai arrived in Taiwan in 1977, when martial law was still in force. While he was pursuing a degree in drama and cinema at the Chinese Culture University of Taiwan, society in Taiwan was in the midst of political, economic and social change. Although Tsai was enrolled to study in the theatre department, most of the time he did not go to classes. Instead, he spent much of his time in the film library viewing videos, exploring and studying European films and auteur films. He had also collected a library of pirated videotapes of auteur films before the Taiwan government prohibited illegal copying of videos and films. Today, he continues to hunt for auteur films in video shops selling pirated videos.

When Tsai was still a student, he lived in various low-income districts of Taipei, where he mingled with people who lived marginal lives in a big city. He experienced a flood in his little room. Tsai saw a couple, who lived under his floor, fight three times in one night – and almost kill each other. He also owned and ran an eatery and prepared take-out foods for customers. After graduating from film school, for about 10 years he worked as a theatrical producer, television producer, and screenwriter. In the early days of his film career in the 1980s, Tsai often went to the district called Ximending, the displaced traditional city centre where teenagers particularly liked to loiter, now famous for its inexpensive shopping, movie theatres, and film production houses. Besides going there to watch movies, Tsai also spent time walking the streets to meet ordinary people like teenagers, small street-corner vendors, and old Chinese soldiers. Ximending became the central location for his TV series and Tsai's first film, *Rebels of the Neon God* (hereafter *Rebels*). Today, he still walks around the streets there and even considers the district his film studio (Rehm *et al.*, 1999). That Tsai is neither a Mainlander nor Taiwanese, an immigrant brought up with Chinese cultural tradition, and has a lower-class origin, make him a unique

and objective observer. Tsai's esoteric film-making, his years of training, his chosen student life and his preference for the urban district, allow him to understand and become an acute commentator of Taipei's under-class society.

Rebels (see figure 10.1), a study of disaffected Taiwan teenagers in Taipei, was Tsai Ming-Liang's debut feature film, which won him numerous international prizes, including the First Prize at the Turin International Film Festival in 1992, the Bronze Prize at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1993, and a Special Jury Prize *ex aequo* at the Singapore International Film Festival in 1994. Following this highly successful debut, Tsai made another four films that have won him further international recognition. His second film, *Vive L'Amour* (*Aiqing wansui*; see figure 10.2), won the Golden Lion award for best film at the 1994 Venice Film Festival. In 1997, his third film, *The River* (*Heliu*; see figure 10.3), won the Special Jury Prize at the Berlin Film Festival and Best Film at the Singapore Film Festival. In 1998, his fourth film, *The Hole* (*Dong*; see figure 10.4), commissioned by a group of French TV producers as part of their end-of-the-millennium series, won the Golden Hugo Best Film award at the Chicago Film Festival. In 2001, Tsai made his fifth film, *What Time*

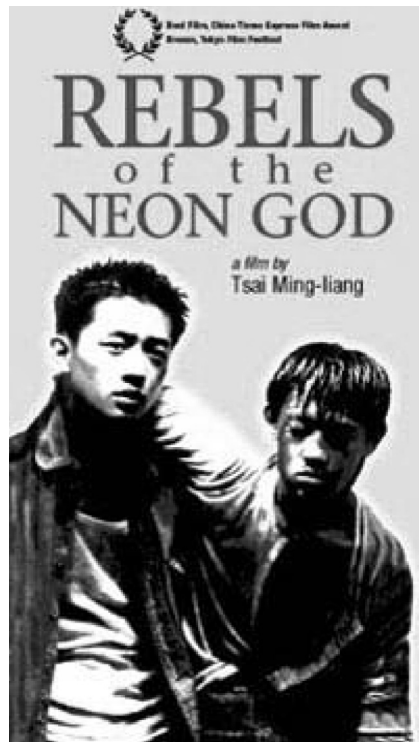


Figure 10.1. *Rebels of the Neon God*. Source: <http://mongrelmedia.com/films/RebelsOfTheNeonGod.html>

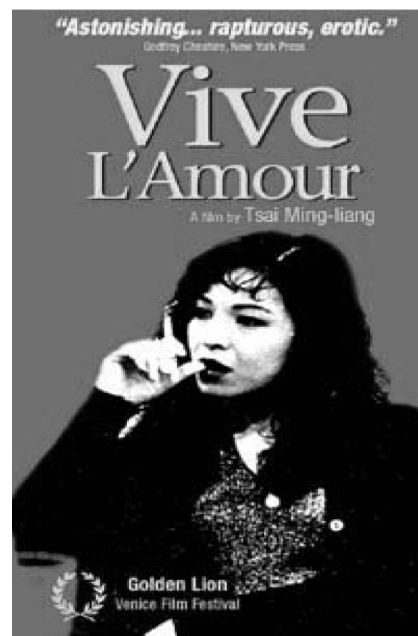


Figure 10.2. *Vive L'Amour*. Source: <http://mongrelmedia.com/films/Vive.html>

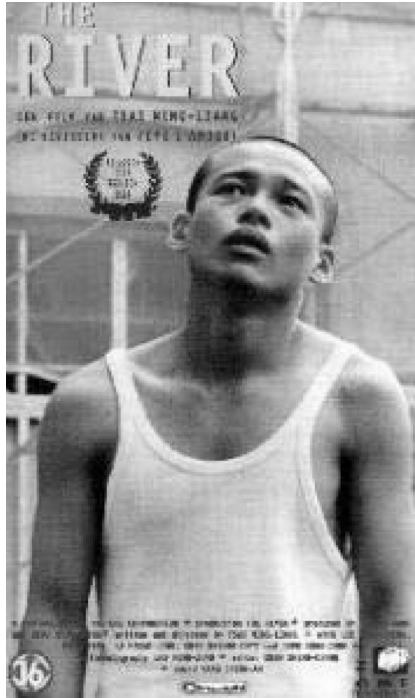


Figure 10.3. *The River*. Source: http://207.136.67.23/film/DVDReview/the_river.htm



Figure 10.4. *The Hole*. Source: <http://www.cse.unsw.edu.au/~peteg/zine/toto/tsai.htm>



Figure 10.5. *What Time Is It There?*
Source: <http://www.pegasofilm.de/programm/film.asp?fMovieID=62>

Is It There? (*Ni naban jidian zhong?*; see figure 10.5), in Taipei and Paris, which also received rave reviews.

Recurrent Themes in Tsai Ming-Liang's Films

By 2001, Tsai had made five interrelated films, using an ensemble cast and revisiting certain characters, locations and themes.² They are presented as one film either seen from five different angles, or perceived under the influence of five different moods, or as a sequence of family history. Several recurrent themes appear in these films, which have uniquely become Tsai's special concern. These similarities seem more striking than their differences.

Taipei – An Unspoken Central Character/Setting

Spatial location is pertinent to Tsai's films. His image of Taiwan's contemporary culture of the 1980s and 1990s is elaborated through his portrait of Taipei. In *Rebels*, Tsai's debut, the film is actually encircled in a particular neighbourhood, the Ximending district in southwest Taipei, known to be teeming with teenagers, where young protagonists aimlessly zip along its main avenues on their motorcycles. This particular district holds a significant meaning to Tsai for it was here he observed teenagers and received a thorough introduction to Taipei and world cinema.

In all Tsai's five feature films, Taipei is portrayed as a world of urban dissatisfaction, in which people are physically isolated from each other; their feelings are cut off from one another; they move around like perverse beings in dimly-lit rooms, flooded apartments and murky hotel rooms; they hang out in a noisy video arcade, a coffee house, or a gay sauna, looking for comfort to ease their loneliness and isolation. Tsai Ming-Liang, during an interview, told a reporter:

Everything has its place and its own life. It is an idea very close to Chinese Buddhism, which regards the human body as a place of 'passage', which means that after some decades, the mind will abandon the body. This belief also holds true for a home and a building.' (Rehm et al., 1999, p. 103)

He is clearly targeting his subject on a specific social group. In Tsai's films, because his characters exchange very few words, the place or a setting of where the character has chosen to be becomes very important. Under this mindset, informed by his experience, Taipei is a melancholy central character in which delinquency, vandalism, lonely souls, dysfunctional families, and homosexuality all herald. This metropolis also projects a new cultural model personified by Western capitalist ideology that challenges traditional Chinese cultural values by tearing down and reconstructing moral disciplines and social order *vis à vis* the family, the school, and sexual relations (Wu, 2002, pp. 58–64). Tsai's films hone directly into the social conflict and ideological confrontation evidenced in a globalizing Taipei.

Marginal People and Common Problems

All characters in Tsai's films are underclass people, by their own choice on the fringe of urban society, and somewhat socially dysfunctional. Some critics describe Tsai's characters as rather invisible and unnoticeable to other people whose paths they cross. Tsai's aim of portraying these types of character in his films, by unveiling the characters' privacy, is to make them noticeable and become real in the audiences' eyes (Rehm et al., 1999, p. 98). Tsai claims he films these people because they interest him and please him. They are the people with whom he is familiar and feels close to. For example, Lee Kang-Sheng, named Xiao Kang in all his films, and Miao Tian,

who portrays Xiao Kang's father in most of his films, are images familiar in his own life. The actresses in his films are also women whom he finds adorable. They all have a motherly, strong-willed side, which reminds him of his own maternal grandmother. What interests Tsai is that those people come from an environment that he is familiar with and has experienced.

In Tsai's first feature film, *Rebels*, Xiao Kang lives in a very typical family in present-day Taiwan. His father, like many other fathers in Taiwan today, is a Mainlander who has retreated to Taiwan from his hometown in China. He has gone through wars and left his family behind in China. He is quiet, diligent, and lives with the traditional obligation of feeding his family. Even though he has lived more than half his lifetime in Taiwan, has married a Taiwanese woman and fathered a son, he still considers himself a Mainlander and not a local Taiwanese. He hopes that some day he will be able to return to China, but most likely he will not be able to do so. This is a typical family which has a built-in identity conflict.

Xiao Kang, another typical product of the second generation of Mainlanders, with a father from the mainland and a Taiwanese mother, was raised in a bilingual environment. He is confused, unmotivated, distracted and bored with his tutorial classes, and rides a motorcycle through the streets of Taipei. He spends his time hanging out in noisy, crowded video arcades, tailing two juvenile delinquents who steal computer chips from the arcade, and finally vandalizes one of the delinquents' motorcycles.

Young people, like Xiao Kang in *Rebels*, riding motorcycles, cruising around on scooters or wandering the city on foot, waiting for something to happen, are common street scenes in Taiwan, especially the Taipei of the 1980s and 1990s. They are lonely, lost, unable to communicate with their parents, and left out of the global economy and society. For Taipei's youth, riding a motorcycle, even if aimlessly and going no where, seems to be the only hope they have to seek escape from an oppressive modern urban culture – the city is desolate, the nights seem endless, and life becomes monotonous.

In the late 1980s, juvenile delinquency was the most visible and serious social problem in Taiwan. Rapid industrialization has decentralized traditional notions of patriarchy as well as disintegrated lines of communication between different generations. Young people, who were born and grew up during the newly developing industrial culture, and the elderly, who belonged to an agrarian culture, found it difficult to communicate with each other. The generation gap, rather alien to traditional Chinese culture, became a thorny social problem. With the ever widening generation gap between parents and children, young people neglected their school work and spent long hours playing video games in crowded video arcades, hanging out in dark coffee houses, and sometimes committing activities of petty thievery (Harrell and Huang, 1994, p. 212). They were not ill prepared for

participating in the new urban activities and taking advantage of the economic opportunities brought by global modernization.

In Taipei, increasing numbers of delinquents were arrested for crimes – about four times greater than the increase in Taipei's teenage population (Selya, 1995, p. 173). Some studies conclude problems of juvenile delinquency as being caused by rapid population growth and modernization, which complicated family life. Furthermore, some KMT elites blamed the political liberalization, taking place in Taiwan over the past two decades, for contributing to the increase of juvenile delinquency. Others feel that economic development has led to an overall decline in values and morals (Selya, 1995, p. 174). These are the displaced youth portrayed in Tsai Ming-Liang's films.

A Woman's Place is not at Home

In 1970s, when economic growth gave rise to new employment opportunities, women in Taiwan began leaving the kitchens and moving into the labour market; however, they were mostly poor, young women, on average 25 years old or younger taking the many low-skill, manual labour, and service jobs. As rising educational opportunities appeared, women gained better employment outside their homes in the 1980s and 1990s. Education became a social mechanism in altering the lives of women, providing a means for them to realize their potential and advance their status in the family and society.

Tsai's films deal with issues of modern women in Taiwan. His female characters are strong-willed. The best representative is Ms. Lin, a real estate agent, in *Vive L'Amour*. She knows that the modern society of Taipei is dominated by buyer-seller relationships. She does not talk much, except when she is trying to persuade her clients to buy properties – when she talks with enthusiasm. Throughout the entire film, she is extremely quiet and indifferent to her surroundings, and shows neither pleasure nor displeasure in her life. She simply moves around the empty apartments and houses she sells. Her emotional response is as empty and cold as those houses, depicted by her abrasive way of talking to her clients and by her ways of dominating her partner during sex without showing any feeling.

Ms. Lin, a working-woman, has completely abandoned her kitchen. In *Vive L'Amour*, she eats at a roadside food stand at the night market and brings home a takeout lunch box. Here, the elimination of a functional kitchen seems to be a way she avoids any domestic duty, setting herself free to be socially independent and able to do her work outside the home. Interestingly, however, this liberation brings no happiness or fulfilment to her. The most unexpected emotional outburst occurs at the end of this film, after she has had sex the previous night. She leaves a luxury apartment and walks into a nearly finished park, Da'an senlin gongyuan

(Ta-an Forest Park) also known as No. 7 Park, sits on an empty bench, and begins to cry. Her crying lasts at least four minutes. Her eyes are empty. Her face is fallen. She appears extremely exhausted. The film ends at the crying scene in the park, seemingly to imply the failure of the city to provide her with any sense of identity and stability. Tsai offers no resolution to her desolation, but an acute social observation and commentary.

Disintegration of the Family and Confronting Sexuality

Tsai's five feature films, thus far, have all centred on the main character Xiao Kang. It is important to view Tsai's films in the order of their release because they are presented as a sequential history of one family. Tsai even admits in his production note for *The River* that the film is a continuation of *Rebels* and *Vive L'Amour* and further expansions of his character. Xiao Kang is no longer an adolescent in *Rebels*. He left home in *Rebels*, searched for his identity in *Vive L'Amour*, and returned to his home in *The River*. However, it is not certain whether the idea of producing all Tsai's films in the same framework, as a sequential family story, was already formed with the filming of *Rebels*.

According to his production note for *The River*, Tsai wanted Xiao Kang to come back to a family or home that he does not really care for, but needs his parents to care for his illness. Xiao Kang's family, in an under-lit apartment, flooded with rainwater in every corner, becomes 'the river' that buries his gay father's unspeakable secret. In Tsai's first two films, *Rebels* and *Vive L'Amour*, he probed into Xiao Kang's search for sexuality in a very hesitant and quiet way – with no attempt to expand this self-exploration further or to offer any resolution to his search. However, in *The River*, the father's hidden secret, like uncontrollable rainwater pervading every corner of the apartment, has come out.

In *The River*, Tsai cries for the disintegration of the traditional Confucian family. Under the stress of modernization, the Confucian familial tradition, considered a source of values for the Chinese people and society, has completely disintegrated. The ideology of multiple generations all residing under the same roof has given way to a modern nuclear family, where family members lack communication; father and son engage in casual promiscuous sex, while the mother has an affair with a sullen, younger video-porn pirate. In addition to deconstructing the father image and family order, Tsai has also exposed issues of incest and homosexuality, a gay father's genuine pain of not being able to come out of the closet and a son's questioning of his own sexuality. The father in *The River* is incapable of making any autonomous decision. In a larger social-cultural context, he is defined as a father who must provide for the family. But, as a secretly gay father, he has very few options in a closed society. It is extremely daring for Tsai to stage a scene in *The*

River that has the father unknowingly masturbating his son in a gay sauna, and then slapping his son when the lights come on.

According to Tsai, his original plan was to have the father and son just run into each other without having any sexual interaction in the sauna. At the last moment, however, he asked himself why he wanted to shoot this scene; why not have the father and son physically interact in the dark; why hadn't he dared to have thought that until then? Was it because of a fear of shooting such a scene? It is from this process of Tsai's own internal dialogue – without external concern of how an audience would react – that Tsai shot the scene, because it had emerged from the depths within his own self. This scene in *The River* has brought him much hostile criticism. Some people, only remembering the incestuous scene, hated his film. Meanwhile, the homosexual community questioned why he had to show homosexuals in such a sad, dysfunctional, and dark setting. Finally, feminists disliked this film because it shows a world full of men who reject women. Tsai obviously has touched a latent social raw nerve, which seriously concerns Taipei society. He says *The River* is his favourite because it is the richest of his films. However, after shooting and before editing the film, Tsai hid for a month because he was simply terrified of editing that scene (Rehm et al., 1999, p. 98).

Water is Much More Important than Food

One fascinating aspect of Tsai's movies is his conceptualization and reduction of food and eating to a purely practical act of maintaining bodily function. This is completely against the Chinese tradition of enjoying eating. In the Chinese tradition, a kitchen and a dinner table are where family members cook and eat together – and is the symbolic heart of the home. However, in Tsai's films, the kitchen appears as an unused little corner with very few utensils and, at times, even clogged or flooded with water. His characters often eat simple instant-noodles alone in their dimly lit rooms or apartments. Apparently, Tsai has no intention of portraying those pleasurable aspects of eating rituals or family solidarity, because in his films the emptiness of living and the disintegration of family have stripped away all concerns for a so-called 'good life' – good food, extravagant living quarters, and congenial family – which were major concerns of Taiwanese society in the 1990s.

Instead of eating normal food, Tsai constantly shows his characters drinking and applying water to their bodies, and ultimately soaking their entire bodies in the bathtub. Tsai often mentions that water is very important in his films because it symbolizes love. He regards the characters in his films as plants, which are short of water and almost on the verge of dying from lack of water. Therefore, water for Tsai symbolically represents the love that his characters lack and desperately need (Rehm et al., 1999, p. 114).

Water is also a subterranean flow within the characters of Tsai's film. There are unspeakable secret desires and yearning for love. In *The River*, there are several forms of water that appear in the film, including heavy rains outside of the apartment or rainwater flooding Miao Tian's room. In this film, water symbolizes a gay father's unspeakable secret of yearning for love. This uncontrollable subterranean flow floods his room. He tries everything he can to stop the water from ruining his room, but fails. Instead, water floods every corner of his apartment. The movie ends with his wife climbing up to the rooftop to do everything she can to cover up the leaking spot.

In Tsai's films, his representation of water is easily detected in scenes of a polluted Tamsui River as well as the non-stop pouring rain, or the recurrence of flood water inside an apartment, and waste-water flowing back into the kitchen. Though Tsai mentions only the relations between water and love in his films, in many instances, all these different forms of water also imply his unspoken concern for Taiwan's social chaos and environmental issues, resulting from changes in familial and social order, economic prosperity, and political climate of the 1980s and 1990s.

It is no coincidence that the polluted water of Tamsui River appears as a main source that caused Xiao Kang's strange illness in *The River*. Tamsui River, located in the northern part of Taipei, was once a scenic river that provided navigation all the way upstream to Taipei and to fishing and recreation grounds. Since 1950s, some 10,000 shops and factories have been built along the river, fouling it with human and industrial waste. The river has also been used for decades as a garbage dumping ground from the metropolitan area. Even though the Environmental Protection Agency, working with the Department of Environmental Protection in the Taipei City Government, established a 15-year programme in the mid-1980s to clean up the Tamsui, today it is still polluted with raw sewage along the riverbank. The name 'Tamsui,' meaning 'clear water,' thus reflects a rather ironic connotation (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 250).

In Tsai's production note for *The River*, he even mentions that when he was filming one of his TV dramas he had an actor jump into Tamsui River for a scene. Three days after the filming, that actor became sick because he had swallowed its polluted water. As a matter of fact, after Tsai finished filming that movie, there was also news about a dead body discovered floating in the Tamsui River (Jiao, 1997, p. 19). In Tsai's films, water is also symbolic of environmental concerns.

Popular Religion as a Part of Daily Life

As a second generation Mainlander whose mother is Taiwanese, Xiao Kang is raised in the Taiwanese tradition, especially with respect to his religious beliefs. The best example of these beliefs can be seen in *Rebels* and *What Time Is It There?*. In *Rebels*,

the mother goes to the temple and finds out from the Daoist priest that the reason Xiao Kang is disaffected and unwilling to concentrate on his studies is because he is the reincarnation of the child rebel god named Nezha, which is the source of the film's title. She requests the priest to give her a talisman for her son. After obtaining one, she returns home, burns it, and mixes the ashes into the dinner dishes so that Xiao Kang may consume the remedy and hopefully resolve his problems. In *The River*, when Xiao Kang is sick with a strange illness on his neck, his mother goes to the temple and prays for him. The father also takes Xiao Kang to see a religious healer, hoping that religious prayers and remedies could heal Xiao Kang's illness. In *What Time Is It There?*, the mother is obsessed with the death of her husband and thinks that his spirit is a white fish in the fish tank in the apartment. She pays for a Daoist priest to perform channelling rituals, she offers food to her dead husband at a special altar and at the dinner table, and she covers the entire house with paper and bed sheets because she thinks her deceased husband would be afraid of light.

These recurrent scenes of religious rituals or practices may appear superstitious or even ridiculous to some viewers, yet, it is Tsai's way of showing how popular religion is still a very common practice among many Taiwanese families in contemporary society. Xiao Kang's parents might seem ignorant in using the ashes of a talisman to prevent him from rebelling against them, or in using a religious healer to cure his strange illness; nonetheless, it is their way of expressing love to him.

Nowadays, even successful Taiwanese politicians use religious practices and ceremonies to build electoral support for their campaigns. In the 1980s, some townships even began their executive campaigns with a rally at the candidate's campaign headquarters and a procession to Mazu's temple and other local temples throughout the town (Rubinstein, 1994, p. 397). Religious practices, including the use of a Daoist priests and the spiritual medium to communicate with the dead, are very common in families, where one of the parents is Taiwanese.

Speech is a Dangerous Thing

In Tsai's films, the characters communicate with each other without much dialogue. He says to reporters that the lack of dialogue in all his films is not deliberate – not as a way of creating a style for himself. Rather, his characters are merely presented in solitary situations, and are unlikely to talk to themselves. For instance, in *Vive L'Amour*, the three main characters, a second-hand real estate agent Ms. Lin, a salesman for ceramic reliquaries Xiao Kang, and a illegal night-stand clothing peddler, A Long, are all isolated individuals, about whom Tsai offers no past information or hints about their future. They are unaware of each other's existence and sometimes hide from each other; therefore, there is hardly any dialogue in *Vive L'Amour*. By cross-cutting three unrelated characters and withholding their

background information, Tsai leaves a lot of space for the audience to interpret their relationships and simply trusts his characters to move the audience without dramatized conversation and emotional background music.

As for the scenes in which family members do not have much to say to one another, Tsai explains it is so simply because they are that type of family – a type common in present-day Taiwan. He further explains that since people, in reality, rarely communicate and talk to one another, it is only natural for him to show such social truth through his films. Tsai also believes that the message he wants to convey to the audience, reflecting his long observation in Ximending, should be presented not through superficially constructed dialogue, but through the way his characters would naturally behave, and through how the audience interprets their viewing. In other words, he wants to transmit his message to and communicate with his audience through action, and not, spoken language, through real life characters, and not, artificial ones.

Tsai thinks that often what people say is the reverse of what they do. Under this mindset, he thinks that using too much speech in the film is a dangerous thing. Instead, he considers spoken language as merely one aspect of sound, which is also often lacking in his films. He does not want the dialogue to explain the action taken by characters. He does not want music to enhance artificially the emotion or atmosphere of his films. Tsai wants to reduce his communication of Taipei's social and cultural malaise in the starkest form so that the audience is able to feel the true spirit and atmosphere of his narrative as the film develops. Furthermore, Tsai's scripted silence further corresponds to his objective effort to show that 'every individual is very hard to understand', as he often explains to reporters. Limited dialogue in his films certainly creates a certain mystique of each character. Without much dialogue, his films allow audiences to interpret and judge – unimpeded – any thought or action of Tsai's characters.

Summary and Conclusion

Tsai Ming-Liang, although living in Taiwan for more than 20 years, still considers himself an outsider in Taiwanese society. He claims repeatedly that he is disinterested in understanding Taiwan's past – also asserting, his films do not search for Taiwan's identity. Tsai often emphasizes to reporters, 'I am using the films to document what I think; I only make films that I want to make . . . I care for people who surround me . . . and everything I described (in my films) is related to my life'. From his conversations with reporters and the content of his films, we can see that Tsai's films echo a neo-realist style of filmmaking. A film critic in Taiwan claimed Tsai's *Rebels* is

a story of you (the audience) and I (the reporter) in our youth as we sadly and aimlessly drift

in the marginal city area of Ximending feeling empty and discontented. It is a neo-realist film. The setting and background of the film is so real that it could not be anymore real than the real life. It appears that the story reflects our own past experience, but it actually continues to reflect the current life of others . . . 'rebellion, the family, desire, disasters' are the basic rhythm of marginal city life. This is also the basic rhythm of Tsai Ming-Liang's films. (Deng, <http://www.ncu.edu.tw/~eng/FilmCenter/TsaiF.htm>)

Indeed, Tsai successfully presents his observations in genuine and true to life documentary-like films. He does not tell fictional stories in his films. At the end of all Tsai's films, he offers no definite answer or resolution to the situations presented in his films. He does not draw verdicts, but presents social reality as he sees it, and draws his audience to confront the social and cultural problems of the marginalized community and individuals.

Tsai distrusts the use of narrative as an artificial structuring device. Absence of conversation prompts his audience to absorb fully his unique and powerful observation, while permitting the audience itself to assess the social condition through its own interpretation of the meaning underlying Tsai's films. He uses 'real people', such as Xiao Kang, who had no formal theatre training before appearing in Tsai's first film *Rebels*, instead of actors. He also made extensive use of locations within Taipei city – for instance, an apartment in a low-income housing project – to produce a grainy and under-lit look, rather than studio shooting. Most importantly, his films deal with social issues and changes affecting the everyday life of the underclass in Taipei. When an official questioned Tsai why he often depicts Taipei as such a dark, dirty and noisy city even though there are many beautiful locations in Taipei, he replied, 'It is so obvious that there are a large group of people who are still living in a rather poor condition and rotten environment; their voices are often neglected by the so-called clean and orderly society, where both sides are unable to communicate with each other' (Huang, 1998; <http://lib.tngs.edu/tw/webnote/>). Inevitably, Tsai's films prompt their viewers to reflect on the ills of globalization, and the cultural malaise it engenders throughout society.

It is impossible to view Tsai's films in a historical vacuum in spite of his own insistence and proclamations of disinterest in understanding Taiwan's past. Undeniably, Tsai's evocative, if not shocking, filmmaking echoes of social commentary on the effects of modernization as well as a forewarning that those significant recent social, economic and political changes are the determinants of its present and future. True, his films are comparably less loaded with political and historical issues – a radical departure from his fellow directors, Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang. Nevertheless, Tsai's films reflect the real, and even troubling, change in recent Taiwan, having both social and historical value. Tsai is able to demonstrate through his films his observation and selection of a nexus of complex human relations intertwined with contemporary social issues – particularly, crises

in faith and identity, juvenile delinquency, dysfunctional patriarchy, disintegrating communication, dissolution of the traditional family, homosexuality, and environmental degradation – in the postmodern society of Taipei in the aftermath of the economic miracle of the 1990s.

Paradoxically, Tsai often says to reporters that his films are closely related to Taiwan's economic prosperity and social change. Yet his method of showing this aspect is to move methodically from a commonly portrayed surface to his character's inner life by exploring and revealing the impact that Taiwan's globalization has brought on their lives and behaviour in the urban reaches of Taipei. Tsai reveals the superficiality of Taiwanese life and the psyche of those people who live on the fringes of society, and their emptiness and hopelessness in a vast metropolis. It seems Tsai wants his viewers to re-evaluate the assumption that globalization, modernization, and the 'economic miracle' in Taiwan is 'good and desirable'. Are there negative impacts of modernization and globalization – namely, a deterioration of morale standards and cultural breakdown – plaguing Taiwan society today? Some scholars posited that the Confucian values – of hard work, loyalty, consideration – had enabled the spectacular, recent economic progress of Taiwan. However, it is possible that within the mobile, atomistic, and individualistic society of Taiwan, the effect of economic progress and modernization has been the erosion of those Confucian values – those same ones which are supposed to have brought about the advantage of globalization and modernization in the first place (Harrell and Huang, 1994, p. 9).

Furthermore, Taipei is often presented as an unspoken central character in all Tsai's films, where traditional familial and social order break down and conventional sexual identity collapses. Tsai's stories often unfold in fragmented spaces – a desolate Taipei city park; deserted Taipei streets at night; empty and dingy unsold apartments; and murky hotel rooms – which constitute an important microcosmic representation of parts of Taipei as purposeless, hopeless, and uncertain. The approach of using these spaces for self-indulgent fantasy may be Tsai's way of implying that Taiwan has long been perceived as a transitional stop by many Mainlanders (Deppman, 2001). To many first generation Mainlanders in Taiwan, the island is not a place that is meant to be a final home. Rather, it is merely a temporary sanctuary or shelter, believing they will eventually return to China or they will move onward to America or Europe if returning to China becomes impossible. So the apartment room and hotel are just temporary locales for them to check in – until they are ready to move on to a permanent and better place. The feeling of 'homelessness' and not being able to be accepted as 'a Taiwanese' is a constant worry of Mainlanders, caused in part by the threat of cross-Strait military tension. This deep and unspoken concern is vividly captured in the sojourn of Tsai's characters all of whom have no claim to love or stability.

Besides Tsai's unique style of filming, the stories presented in his works have clearly made him distinguishable from other contemporary directors in Taiwan. Tsai's films have critically exposed the social and cultural phenomena of the marginalized society in Taipei – a subject which has escaped other filmmakers' attention. His films have uncovered the cultural and social displacement evident in Taiwan society, particularly Taipei, where marginalized individuals excruciatingly and meaninglessly subsist on the fringes of society with no hope or dreams, and where every move and action they take seems to run counter to Confucian ideals and Chinese traditions. While other directors use their films to make political statements or seek historical truth, Tsai Ming-Liang uses his films to present his own insight into contemporary life in Taipei. Indeed, Tsai's genuine, true to life and documentary-like films serve as essential and unapologetic social documentation and commentary of Taipei's society today.

Notes

1. The 28 February Incident marks a major conflict between Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist forces and local Taiwanese. It was triggered by an incident occurring the day before when a mainland Chinese policeman confiscated the goods of a Taiwanese woman selling smuggled cigarettes. She was beaten mercilessly by the policeman when resisting the arrest. The next day, 28 February, 1947, angry crowds of Taiwanese gathered in the streets of Taipei to protest against the political corruption and economic repression of Chiang's Nationalist regime. As a result, martial law was declared, and thousands of Taiwanese were murdered by Nationalist troops. (<http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Papers/CityOfSadness/behind3.html>).
2. Tsai made two more films in 2003. *Good Bye Dragon Inn* (Original title: *Bu san*) and *The Sky Walk Is Gone* (Original title: *Tianqiao bu jian le*). Although *Good Bye Dragon Inn* is also centred on Xiao Kang, it is not related to the Tsai's first five films.

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