



JANUS FILMS *presents*

TAIPEI STORY

A film by Edward Yang

Edward Yang's long-unavailable second feature is a mournful anatomy of a city caught between the past and the present. Made in collaboration with Yang's fellow New Taiwan Cinema master Hou Hsiao-hsien—who cowrote the screenplay, helped finance the project, and oversaw this restoration—*Taipei Story* chronicles the growing estrangement between a washed-up baseball player (Hou, in a rare on-screen performance) working in his family's textile business and his girlfriend (pop star Tsai Chin), who clings to the upward mobility of her career in property development. As the couple's dreams of marriage and emigration begin to unravel, Yang's gaze illuminates the precariousness of domestic life and the desperation of Taiwan's globalized modernity.

"Quietly stunning ... Looks absolutely superb."

—*Time Out London*

"A turning point in the history of Taiwanese cinema ... Essential viewing."

—Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Chicago Reader*

"A masterpiece that historically hasn't been easy to see in the States. A delicate work of low-key modernism, imbued with fragile melancholia and an astonishing turn by none other than Hou Hsiao-hsien."

—Dan Sullivan, *Film Comment*

Taiwan • 1985 • 110 minutes • Color • In Mandarin with English subtitles • 1.85:1 aspect ratio • Screening format: DCP

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Restored by the Film Foundation's World Cinema Project at Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory in association with the Cinémathèque royale de Belgique and Hou Hsiao-hsien.

EDWARD YANG FILMOGRAPHY

In Our Time: "Expectation"
(segment of omnibus film) (1982)

That Day, on the Beach (1983)

Taipei Story (1985)

The Terrorizers (1986)

A Brighter Summer Day (1991)

A Confucian Confusion (1994)

Mahjong (1996)

Yi Yi (2000)

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MODERN PLANNING

BY ANDREW CHAN

To appreciate just how bitter a pill Edward Yang was serving up with *Taipei Story*, it helps to understand the sarcastic fake-out embedded in the film's Chinese title. Lifted from a poem by Tang dynasty master Li Bai, *Qingmei zhuma* translates literally as "Green plum, bamboo horse," a phrase that, like many classical idioms in the language, distills human experience down to a tableau of emblematic objects that can be savored by the mind's eye. Here the experience being described is one of kismet—an eternal love that evolves out of the carefree games of childhood and preserves its innocence even as the companions age. Seeing these words on a marquee in 1985, the year the film was released, the average Taiwanese viewer would have been primed to expect the kind of escapist melodrama that commercial Chinese-language cinema had excelled at over the previous decades, or at least something in tune with the treacly hit ballads of lead actress (and Yang's first wife) Tsai Chin. But instead of the pastoral, ever-blooming romance evoked in Li Bai's lines, what we get is the dry chill of urban malaise.

In the film's opening scene, a couple walk through an apartment, sizing up its empty spaces, shruggingly deeming it "not bad" as a potential residence. The front door is wrapped in plastic; the bedroom window looks out onto the edifice of another anonymous condominium. The man, Lung (Yang's fellow New Taiwan Cinema titan Hou Hsiao-hsien, who shares a writing credit with Chu Tien-wen and Yang), is casually dressed and emotionally distant, mimicking a baseball batter with his swinging arms. His yuppie-attired girlfriend, Chin (Tsai), eyes one corner of a room from behind her oversize shades and begins to list the middle-class fixtures that could fit in it: stereo, TV, VCR. Like the green plum and bamboo horse of the film's title, her roll call of electronic appliances invokes the stability of a kind of dream life, an archetype ready to be inhabited. But Chin and Lung, reminiscent of the languorously embattled lovers in the famous apartment scene in *Contempt*, are already being boxed in and divided by the floor plan, their fates circumscribed by the threshold of each doorway.

Before studying engineering and gradually finding his way to cinema, Yang contemplated attending Harvard for architecture, a field

that would have exercised some of the native gifts that became so evident in his films: his methodical approach to film structure, his sensitivity to how people interact with (and within) built landscapes, his understanding of how place becomes a conduit for emotionally charged ideas about history and identity. The influence of this abandoned profession is nowhere more pronounced than in *Taipei Story*, his second feature, which reflects the worldly skepticism of a man who was born in Shanghai and raised in Taiwan, and had studied and worked in the U.S. for more than a decade.

Yang returned to Taiwan in 1981, and his film career, along with Hou's, marked a major break from the dominant trends in Taiwanese cinema prior to the 1980s. Together, they became the leading figures in a generation of directors who injected a thrilling sense of modernity into an industry whose most distinctive products up to that point had been martial arts films, tear-jerking adaptations of best-selling romance novelist Chiung Yao, and government-sanctioned "healthy realism" that promoted traditional values as a counterbalance to the nation's rapid westernization. This artistic conservatism was partly the result of the Kuomintang government's thirty-eight-year imposition of martial law, and while the New Taiwan Cinema did not become explicitly political until the late eighties, when the law was lifted, Yang's and Hou's early films were among the first to depict Taiwan as a place with a burgeoning sense of its own social and historical integrity, independent of a mainland China that long considered it a mere repository.

For Yang, this implicit acknowledgment of cultural specificity is complicated by the encroaching forces of Western values and money, the angst-ridden awareness of which distinguishes his cinema from Hou's contemporaneous chronicles of provincial family life (*A Summer at Grandpa's*; *A Time to Live, a Time to Die*). With much of its action playing out in depersonalized bourgeois spaces—a bedroom furnished with little more than a mattress and a television, a cramped pub with Michael Jackson blaring from the speakers, a rooftop hangout in the shadow of a flickering neon sign—*Taipei Story* regards globalized architecture, in all its

pervasiveness, not as a portal to the outside world but as a symbol of enclosure, something to be thrashed against.

Like the more widely appreciated masterpieces that Yang made later in his career, *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) and *Yi Yi* (2000), *Taipei Story* is charged with the urgency of a director attempting to map out a whole society through the interlocking oppositions of gender, class, generation, and cultural persuasion that threaten to pull it apart. But whereas those later works boast the intricate plotting and ensemble acting that have led to his reputation as a novelistic director (further differentiating him from the more impressionistically inclined Hou), *Taipei Story* is hollowed out and almost airless, qualities that make its portrait of two lives grinding to a halt feel that much more unforgiving. As in almost all of Yang's work, the central tensions arise out of what lovers, friends, and family do not know—and do not care to know—about each other. And the more we see of Chin and Lung in their private moments together, the more they seem bewildered and embarrassed that, despite having known each other since their school days, what they've spent so many years calling a relationship now barely merits the name.

As if to offset the forbidding solidity of its concrete-jungle environment, the film takes on an apparitional quality by pivoting on events that never materialize on-screen or only do so at the margins. Soon after that opening scene in the empty apartment, Lung travels for the first time to Los Angeles to meet with his big-honcho brother-in-law as a prelude to his and Chin's planned emigration to the U.S., a part of the narrative that is completely elided after the title credits and only reluctantly discussed thereafter. In the wake of Lung's return to Taipei, the film unfolds as the chronicle of a reunion that never really comes off. We observe Chin and Lung leading mostly separate lives, all signs pointing to a couple beset not just by the boredom and resentment that can creep into any long-term relationship but by the widening chasm between their worldviews. Yang telegraphs their contrasting lifestyles without much fussy elaboration, situating Chin in the corporate milieu of a property-development firm, where she works as a



ladder-climbing executive assistant before getting unceremoniously demoted, and Lung in the male-dominated world of his old haunts, where he spent his long-lost glory days as a hotshot baseball player. In a rare moment when the pair's personal and professional worlds do converge, Lung is forced to explain to Chin's uppity colleagues that he works at an old-fashioned fabric shop, a piece of information that makes palpable the sheer awkwardness of their incompatibility.

Just as *A Brighter Summer Day* centers on a cipher of a protagonist whose inscrutability is thrown into relief by a cast of vibrant supporting characters, so does *Taipei Story* invest much of its mystery in a richly varied (albeit smaller and less intricate) network of bit players. There's the colleague with whom Chin has been having a half-hearted affair, an architect who waxes philosophical about how tiny errors can prove fatal in his line of work. There's the friend (New Taiwan Cinema writer, actor, and director Wu Nien-jen) who spots Lung in midday traffic, another baseball has-been whose life has taken a turn for the worse since serving in the military. And in Yang's most explicit acknowledgment of the sinister patriarchal forces that Chin is up against, we're introduced to her drinking, gambling deadbeat of a father, who continues to subjugate his daughter and determine her fate, as if to punish her for having achieved a socioeconomic status that overshadows both his and Lung's. We meet him in a quietly brutal scene set in Chin's spooky, shadow-drenched family house, where he and Lung bond over dinner while Chin silently assumes the role of servant and her mother busies herself with household chores. This tyrant serves as the couple's first real flash point when, out of reverence to some code of masculine honor, Lung sacrifices his savings to pull Chin's father out of financial disgrace, leaving Chin incredulous that he

would compromise their shot at making it in America together.

For all the alienation and cultural rootlessness found in Yang's vision of modernity, this depiction of a society shackled to age-old habits of filial piety signals the director's unwillingness to romanticize a Confucian past littered with its own skeletons. The U.S. also offers no safe harbor. The allure of American culture is clear, particularly when it provides the film with its one burst of physical abandon, in the form of a club scene in which Chin's free-spirited younger sister and her rebellious friends dance to "Footloose." But the dream of American freedom reveals its untenability when Lung, previously tight-lipped about his trip to the States (and standing in front of a calendar portrait of Marilyn Monroe), describes a barbaric country where black people are barred from owning high-end real estate and violence is indiscriminately inflicted in the name of self-defense.

Though Yang was already approaching his forties when he made *Taipei Story*, the film registers as the muffled howl of an angry young man resigned neither to the reassurances of tradition nor to the enticements of modernity—a howl that would reach its full-throated peak with his next film, the ferociously postmodern *The Terrorizers*. Echoing the defiant voices of the Hong Kong New Wave (particularly Patrick Tam and his groundbreaking 1982 teen drama *Nomad*), Yang's cynical appraisal of a proudly cosmopolitan city must have been hard to stomach for many Taiwanese of the period, who imagined themselves inheriting an "economic miracle" that distinguished their geopolitically contested island from a mainland China still reeling from the Cultural Revolution. Yet it is this capacity for self-reproach that linked Yang's cinema to the prestigious lineage of European

brooders like Antonioni and Bergman, ensuring its legitimacy to Western viewers. While it was not until the 2000 release of *Yi Yi* that a Yang film enjoyed a proper theatrical run in the U.S., *Taipei Story* did win a critics' prize at Locarno, an early international victory for his homeland's flourishing (though short-lived) art-film movement. Meanwhile, the film was a disaster domestically, dismissed as indulgent and yanked from screens after just three days—an experience that no doubt laid the foundation for Yang's festering disillusionment with the local film culture.

While a preoccupation with what exactly defines contemporary Taiwanese identity certainly invigorated a national cinema that had been stifled for decades by political and industrial constraints, Yang was enough of an outsider to recognize the limits of such an essentializing project. Positioned from within the educated middle class, and suffused with the unease of someone for whom home was a constantly shifting construct, Yang's films are concerned with aspiration, often in the absence of any clear goal. Whereas some filmmakers are primarily interested in the textures of life as it reveals itself in the present moment, Yang, even at his most despairing, is always tempted to look elsewhere, as if to ask what more might be needed to live meaningfully. Fifteen years out from the tender resignation of *Yi Yi*, *Taipei Story*, in all its unrelenting darkness, comes up short on answers. But it's in Yang's ability to face up to the big questions with neither self-consciousness nor self-delusion that the seeds of a later, hard-won hopefulness can be found.

Andrew Chan is web editor at the Criterion Collection. His writing has appeared in *Film Comment*, *Reverse Shot*, *Slant*, and other publications.