

A Brief History of Taiwanese Comedy Cinema

George Chun Han Wang

EARLY CINEMA IN TAIWAN UNDER JAPANESE RULE

Twelve years after China's Qing Dynasty ceded full sovereignty of Taiwan—including Penghu 澎湖 or the Pescadores Islands—to the Empire of Japan, filmmaker Takamatsu Toyojirō 高松豊次郎 (1872–1952) documented the sights and people of colonial Taiwan in his 220-minute silent film *An Introduction to the Actual Condition of Taiwan* (*Taiwan jikkyō shōkai* 台灣實況紹介) (hereafter *An Introduction*). A government-commissioned piece of propaganda intended to educate Japanese audiences about Taiwan, Takamatsu's lengthy documentary was exhibited in Tokyo at the 1907 Meiji Tokyo Industrial Exposition (*Tōkyō Kangyō Hakurankai* 東京勸業博覧会) followed by a seven-month tour throughout mainland Japan.¹ Delivering a historic first glance at the island known as Formosa,² *An Introduction*, albeit a political documentary made by a Japanese native, is commonly considered to be the first film in Taiwan cinema history.³

With its infrastructure modernized and industries strengthened during the colonial period, Taiwan soon became the most advanced economy in East Asia outside Japan itself.⁴ As the business of film exhibition gradually flourished, foreign imports populated the majority of Taiwan's theatre screens. From 1926 to 1941, seventy to eighty percent of Taiwan's film imports were from Japan while ten to twenty-eight percent came from the United States. Although only four to ten percent of the imports were from Shanghai, Chinese-language films were among the most popular.⁵

When it comes to local film production activities, fewer than sixteen features were ever made domestically in Taiwan during the fifty-year colonial period, and most of them were written, directed and produced by Japanese na-

* George Chun Han Wang 王君瀚 (wangch@hawaii.edu) is Professor at ACM: the School of Cinematic Arts in the College of Arts, Languages & Letters at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

¹ Daw Ming Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 6.

² The name Formosa 福爾摩沙 dates from 1542, when Portuguese sailors sighted Taiwan and noted the uncharted island on their maps as Ilha Formosa (beautiful island).

³ Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 6.

⁴ "Taiwan as part of the Japanese empire," Britannica Online. <http://www.britannica.com/place/Taiwan/Early-Nationalist-rule> (accessed July 18, 2022).

⁵ Tian-duo Lee, *Taiwan dianying shehui yu lishi* (Taipei: The Society for Chinese Cinema Studies, 1997), 46–47.

tives from mainland Japan.⁶ Because the colonial government regarded film as a tool to “assimilate” the people of Taiwan,⁷ a localized for-profit film industry was never truly established in colonial Taiwan. Making a Taiwanese-language film for the locals would have risked contradicting the policies forcing the people of Taiwan, including its indigenous population, to learn Japanese language and culture. Investing in local film productions would have been unsustainable while profitable imports dominated the box office. During the half-century of Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945, only three narrative films were made by local filmmakers for Taiwanese audiences.⁸ Leading the trio was *Whose Fault Is It* (*Sheiziguo 誰之過*, 1925, dir. Liu Xiyang 劉喜陽), the first narrative film made in Taiwan by its people. Premiered in mid-September, 1925, the action-romance drama bombed at the box office.⁹ The Taiwan Cinema Study Association (*Taiwan yinghua yanjiuhui*, 台灣映畫研究會), the locally funded and newly established film production company, of which Liu was a founding member consequently went out of business after just one attempt at domestic filmmaking.¹⁰

TURMOIL IN CHANGING TIMES

While Taiwanese cinema had a breakthrough with its first narrative feature *Whose Fault Is It* in 1925, there is no trace of any comedy film being made locally in the rest of the colonial period. Throughout the colonial years, none of the fewer than sixteen narrative feature films produced were in the comedy genre.¹¹ After the Allied victory in the Pacific in 1945, Taiwan was taken over by the Republic of China (hereafter the ROC). Having bid farewell to five decades of Japan’s oppressive regime, Taiwan immediately came under the control of another external authority governed by Chiang Kai-shek’s 蔣介石 Kuomintang Party (*guomindang* 國民黨, hereafter the KMT). When the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949, the KMT had lost control of mainland China to the Chinese Communists Party (hereafter CCP). Vowing to take back China, Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan and declared Taipei the ROC’s temporary capital.

A massive evacuation of approximately one million¹² Chinese mainlanders to Taiwan occurred after the KMT takeover, most of whom regarded them-

⁶ Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132

¹² Ko-hua Yap, “Reassessing Number of Mainland Chinese Immigrants with Declassified Archival Data,” *Taiwan Historical Research* 28, no. 3 (September 2021): 224.

selves as transitory residents of Taiwan and expected to return home on the auspicious day when the KMT reinstated its sovereignty in mainland China. Arriving from across all regions of China, most mainlanders migrants had difficulties communicating with locals who predominantly spoke in the Taiwanese dialect, *taiyu*¹³ 台語 (hereafter *taiyu*), and Japanese. Sprawling visual remnants of Japanese influence throughout Taiwan added to mainlanders' lack of trust in the loyalty and patriotism of the islanders. Miscommunication and clashes between mainlanders and locals ensued in the early years of the KMT regime. On February 28, 1947, an anti-government uprising was violently quelled by the KMT. As many as 28,000 Taiwanese civilians are believed to have been killed¹⁴ as a result of this tragic event known as the February 28 Incident (*ererba shijian* 二二八事件). Consequently, nationwide martial law was imposed on May 20, 1949. Accompanied by political repression and sweeping censorship, martial law enabled KMT's military courts to convict thousands of civilians of sedition and other crimes punishable by death,¹⁵ beginning Taiwan's gloomy era of the White Terror (*baise kongbu* 白色恐怖) that persisted beyond the 1990s.

TANG SHAO-HUA AND TAIWAN'S FIRST COMEDY FEATURE

Ironically, it was during the difficult times in the initial years of the White Terror that Taiwan finally produced its first comedy film on record. On November 16, 1951,¹⁶ principal photography commenced for *Everybody's Happy* (a.k.a. *All Are Happy, Jie da huanxi* 皆大歡喜, 1952), a lighthearted song-and-dance comedy feature directed by pioneering filmmaker Tang Shao-hua 唐紹華 (1908–2010). Focusing on the incompatible dynamics between a rigid traditionalist father and his two gleefully rebellious adult children, Tang's contemporary comedy concludes on an uplifting note as the father opens his minds to allow his daughter to pursue her passions in traditional opera while his foreign-cinema-buff

¹³ Also referred to as *minnanyu* 閩南語 (Southern Fujian language), *Southern Min* or *Taiwanese Hokkien*.

¹⁴ Amy B Wang, "For decades, no one spoke of Taiwan's hidden massacre. A new generation is breaking the silence." *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2017, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/28/for-decades-no-one-spoke-of-taiwans-hidden-massacre-a-new-generation-is-breaking-the-silence/> (accessed July 19, 2022).

¹⁵ "Taiwan Ends 4 Decades of Martial Law," *The New York Times*, July 15, 1987, Section A, Page 2, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/15/world/taiwan-ends-4-decades-of-martial-law.html> (accessed July 17, 2022).

¹⁶ "Chronicle of Film Events (1898–1964)," Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, <http://tfai.openmuseum.tw/muse/exhibition/31433c802eea18dc519230a84065e24f#basic-wzgbio3lo3> (accessed July 13, 2022).

son matures and decides to join the military. Catering to Taiwan's mainlander demographic, *Everybody's Happy* was filmed in the standardized Mandarin-dialect known as *guoyu* 國語 (National language). Produced by the state-run Agricultural Education Film Studio (*nongye jiaoyu dianying gongsi* 農業教育電影公司), it expertly embodied the optimistic tones and patriotic principles typical of a policy film, while injecting much-appreciated comic relief into a story that was easy to relate to for Taiwan's massive mainlander population, most of whom were homesick and uncertain about what their future might hold.

A mainlander himself, Tang Shao-hua was a journalist/playwright turned film entrepreneur who once owned a film company in Shanghai and served as an executive at Hong Kong's Yung Hwa Studios.¹⁷ In addition to spearheading the creation of Taiwan's first comedy feature, Tang also scripted *The Port of Hualian* (*Hualian gang* 花蓮港, 1948, dir. He Feiguang 何非光),¹⁸ a dramatic feature considered to be the first narrative film made locally in Taiwan after the Japanese colonial period.¹⁹ Recognized as one of the most influential filmmakers in postwar Taiwan, Tang was instrumental in gearing local filmmaking into a for-profit industry. Partially funded by private investment,²⁰ he made his second comedy feature, *Where There is No Women* a.k.a. *A Place without Women* (*Meiyou nuren de difang* 沒有女人的地方, 1955). The *guoyupian* 國語片 (Mandarin-dialect film) (hereafter *guoyupian*) tells the story of seven well-educated bachelors enjoying their "female-free" lifestyle while sharing a peaceful countryside residence. When one of them rescues a young lady at the beach and brings her home, their male-only world quickly falls apart. Captivated by her beauty, the roommates turn against each other to compete for her affection. In the era's conservative climate, the film carefully navigated its risky premise, balancing mature situations with pragmatism and discipline. Just like its predecessor *Everybody's Happy*, the fun-filled film concludes with positivity as all the colorful characters commit themselves to serving society. Adhering to the KMT's ideological imperatives to promote nationalism and boost morale, *Where There is No Women* was a significant crossover between a policy film and a revenue-oriented commercial feature.

¹⁷ Rui-jin Peng, ed., *2008 Taiwan wenxue nianjian* 2008 (Taipei: National Museum of Taiwan Literature, 2009), 161.

¹⁸ Taiwan-born He Fei-guang (1913–1997) directed the film on location on Taiwan's scenic East Coast.

¹⁹ Peng, ed., *The Almanac of Taiwan Literature* 2008, 161.

²⁰ Dahan Film Company (*Dahan danying qiyegongsi* 大漢電影企業公司) co-produced the film with state-run Taiwan Film Studios. Source: Open Museum: <http://openmuseum.tw/muse/exhibition/31433c802eea18dc519230a84065e24f#basic-4t0vwmfzd9> and film poster at Douban, <http://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2665642568/> (accessed December 3, 2022).

LEE HSING AND THE FIRST BLOCKBUSTER TAIYUPIAN COMEDY

The lead actor of *Where There Is No Women* was none other than the godfather of Taiwanese cinema, Lee Hsing 李行 (1930–2021). Before he went on to become one of Taiwan's most influential filmmakers, Mandarin-speaking Lee appeared in several films directed by Tang Shao-hua and subsequently worked as an assistant director for Tang in 1957.

In 1955, a 35 mm taiyu opera film directed by educational filmmaker Ho Chiming 何基明, *Xue Pinggui and Wang Baochuan* (*Xue Pinggui yu Wang Baochuan* 薛平貴與王寶釧), became a sensational hit²¹ and blazed a trail for an explosion of commercial *taiyupian* productions. Although not fluent in *taiyu* himself, mainland-born Lee Hsing nonetheless became involved in the trendy low-budget *taiyupian* movement, making his directorial debut²² with *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan* (a.k.a. *Brother Wang and Brother Liu on the Roads in Taiwan*, *Wangge Liuge you Taiwan* 王哥柳哥遊台灣, 1958). Modeled after Hollywood comedy double act *Laurel and Hardy*, the two-part release features *taiyupian* regulars Li Guan Zhang 李冠章 as the overweight shoe shiner Wang and Zhang Fu Cai 張福財 (a.k.a. Shorty Cai 矮仔財) as the skinny rickshaw driver Liu. The two best friends begin their journey on a sad note when a fortune teller correctly predicts that Wang will become wealthy in three days, but Liu will die in forty-four days. Carrying a suitcase full of cash that Wang has just won in the lottery, the inexperienced big spenders embark on the trip of a lifetime and find themselves in a series of unexpected situations and amusing predicaments. On the last day, Liu sleeps in a coffin awaiting his impending death, only to realize the next day that he is still alive. The film ends with Liu marrying his hometown girlfriend, and Wang donating his fortune to charities. Celebrated as Taiwan's first blockbuster comedy, *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan* is a valuable visual documentation of pre-industrial Taiwan. The beloved screen buddies became household names and went on to headline seven more sequels in this popular screen franchise,²³ including the follow-up hits *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Have a Good New Year* (*Wangge Liuge hauguonian* 王哥柳哥好過年, 1961) and *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Five Difficult Traps* (*Wangge Liuge guowuguan* 王哥柳哥過五關, 1962), both directed by Lee Hsing.

²¹ Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 24.

²² While Lee Hsing served as the primary director, co-writer, and editor, the directing credit is shared with Zhang Fangxia 張方霞 and actor Tien Feng 田豐.

²³ Directed by various directors, six *Brother Wang Brother Liu* sequels were made in *taiyu* (in 1959, 1961, 1962, 1965, 1966, and 1969), plus one sequel in *quoyu* produced in 1983.

GOLDEN HORSE AWARDS, BILINGUAL COMEDIES & THE DOWNFALL OF TAIYUPIAN

To inspire the domestic film industry and encourage quality productions, in 1962 Taiwan's Government Information Office (*Xinwenju* 新聞局) established the Golden Horse Awards 金馬獎 as the island's top form of recognition for filmmaking. Also open to eligible *guoyupian* submissions from Hong Kong,²⁴ the Golden Horse quickly became one of the most prestigious film awards in Asia, and is commonly referred to as the Oscars for Chinese-language films. While Hong Kong's wartime drama *Sun, Moon and Star* (*Xingxing yueliang taiyang* 星星月亮太陽, 1961, dir. Evan Yang 易文) snapped up four trophies²⁵ including the best dramatic feature award (*zuijia juqingpian* 最佳劇情片) at Golden Horse's inaugural ceremony,²⁶ ensemble comedy *Sweet Home*, (a.k.a. *Under One Roof*, *Yishi yijia* 宜室宜家, 1961, dir. Tsung Yu 宗由) was the biggest winner from Taiwan, winning the outstanding dramatic feature award (*you deng juqingpian* 優等劇情片)²⁷ plus a supporting actor nod for beloved *Brother Liu* star Zhang Fu Cai (Shorty Cai) and a black-and-white cinematography nod for Hui-ying Hua 華慧英, best known for the stunning cinematography in *A Touch of Zen* (*Xianu* 俠女, 1971, King Hu 胡金銓). Featuring a star-studded cast²⁸ of *taiyupian* and *guoyupian* actors, *Sweet Home* brazenly tackles divisive subjects such as intermarriage between islanders and mainlanders, using humor and laughter to advocate for social harmony and peaceful integration. Aiming to appeal to both *taiyu* and *guoyu* speakers, *Sweet Home* was the first *guoyu-taiyu* bilingual narrative feature²⁹ produced by state-operated powerhouse Central Motion Pictures Corporation (*Zhongyang dianying shiye youxian gongsi* 中央電影事業有限公司)³⁰ (hereafter CMPC). It was also one of the first features filmed at CMPC's newly constructed *Waishuangxi* 外雙溪 studio complex.³¹

²⁴ At the time Hong Kong's powerhouse studios such as Shaw Brothers and MP&GI produced the majority of *guoyupians* exhibited in Taiwan.

²⁵ The MP&GI feature received the best picture, female lead, screenplay, and color cinematography awards.

²⁶ Held on October 31, 1962 in Taipei's Guoguang Theatre (*Guoguang xi yuan* 國光戲院).

²⁷ In addition to the top honor *best dramatic feature* award, three *outstanding dramatic feature* (*you deng juqingpian* 優等劇情片) trophies were awarded to runners-up.

²⁸ Including stars from the *Brother Wang Brother Liu* series Shorty Cai, Li Guan Zhang, and Hu Dou 扈斗 (the fortuneteller), plus the child prodigy Chang Hsiao-yen 張小燕.

²⁹ "Yishi yijia 宜室宜家," Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (TFAI) (*Guojia dianying ji shiting wen-huazhongxin* 國家電影及視聽文化中心), https://tfai.openmuseum.tw/muse/digi_object/f4813c334931f9e4f31bbd998b46f257 (accessed July 22, 2022).

³⁰ Established in 1954 with the merger of the Agricultural Education Film Studio (*Nonye jiaoyu dianying gongsi* 農業教育電影公司) and the Taiwan Film Company (*Taiwan dianying gongsi* 台灣電影公司).

³¹ TFAI, "Yishi yijia 宜室宜家."

Another notable comedy featuring both *taiyu*- and *guoyu*-speaking cast members is Lee Hsing's *Good Neighbors* (*Liang Xiang Hau* 兩相好, 1962). The bilingual comedy tells the story of two neighboring households headed by two medical doctors: the *taiyu*-speaking Taiwanese father practices modern Western medicine, and the *guoyu*-only patriarch from the mainland specializes in traditional Chinese medicine. As members of their younger generation start to date one another despite language and cultural barriers, the parents struggle to work out their differences and misunderstandings. Eventually, the feuding neighbors discover common ground and a wedding unifies the two families. Channeling *Sweet Home*, Lee's *Good Neighbors* dramatized divisions between islanders and mainlanders before prescribing accord and unity to deliver a happy ending. The film paved the way for Lee's brilliant future career beyond *taiyupian*. As the KMT administration began implementing its "guoyu only" language unification measures more aggressively, Lee made a conscious departure from inexpensive *taiyupian* filmmaking to embrace quality *guoyupian* productions. He quickly became a forerunner of the government-sanctioned "Healthy Realism" (*jiankang xieshi* 健康寫實) genre, crafting acclaimed melodramatic classics including Golden Horse best picture and best director winner *Beautiful Duckling* (*Yangya renjia* 養鴨人家, 1964), and Golden Horse outstanding feature *The Silent Wife* (*Yanu qingshen* 啞女情深, 1965).

Guoyupian productions expanded exponentially in the late 1960s as Taiwan progressed towards rapid urbanization and economic growth. But the KMT's *guoyu*-focused governance rapidly marginalized the once favorable market for dialect films,³² leading to *taiyupian*'s downfall. In 1969, eighty-nine *guoyupians* were made, for the first time exceeding the number of *taiyupian* productions (by five films).³³ It was in this milestone year that *guoyupian* titles officially became the mainstream majority in the domestic market. *Taiyupian* was dealt another blow with the mass exodus of its filmmakers and talent when they flocked into the burgeoning television dialect-programming market. By the mid-1970s, there were virtually no remaining *taiyupian* production activities, ending Taiwan's very special era of popular low-budget dialect cinema. In the heyday of the *taiyupian* craze, between 1956 and 1981, over 1,000 *taiyupian* titles were produced.³⁴ Amidst the noteworthy comedies released during *taiyupian*'s swan song is *Foolish Bride, Naive Bridegroom* (a.k.a. *Silly Wife, Foolish Husband, Sanba*

³² Zi Wen Song, ed., *Taiwan dianying sanshi nian* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2006), 30.

³³ Fei Yi Lu, *Taiwan dianying: Zhengzhi, jingji, meixue* (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co. Ltd., 1998), 112.

³⁴ Teresa Huang, "The Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute's Taiwanese-language cinema restoration project," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 14, no. 2 (2020): 150.

xinniang hanzixu 三八新娘憨子婿), a 1967 offbeat romantic comedy directed by prolific *taiyupian* veteran Hsin Chi 辛奇 (1924–2010).

The total number of *taiyupian* produced exceeds 1,500, but only 241 were salvaged by the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute 國家電影及視聽文化中心 (hereafter TFAI) after it began to search for and acquire available *taiyupian* prints in 1988.³⁵ With 167 titles duplicated for preservation and more than sixteen titles digitally restored in-house at TFAI,³⁶ rare *taiyupian* titles have resurfaced in the past decade, propelling the emergence of a new scholarship on *taiyupian* evidenced by insightful published studies, among them the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*' 2020 special issue on *taiyupian* edited by Chris Berry and Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, Ta-wei Chi's *The Bodies of Sadness in the Curative Time: Visual Disabilities in Taiyupian* (2022), and Evelyn Shih's two representative articles on *taiyupian* comedies: *Getting the Last Laugh: Opera legacy, comedy and camp as attraction in the late years of Taiyupian* (2013) and *Two Fools: Comedy as dialectical tension in mid-century Chinese cinemas* (2018).

PAI CHING-JUI AND HIS SOCIAL SATIRES

As the first Chinese student³⁷ to study filmmaking at Italy's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (National Film School), the prominent Healthy Realism filmmaker Pai Ching-jui 白景瑞 (1931–1997) introduced authorial approaches and innovative techniques to the island's film industry. The superior quality and elevated relevance of Pai's works justifiably earned him commercial and critical approval. Having swept up seven technical³⁸ Golden Horse awards in 1968 with his coming-of-age drama *Lonely Seventeen* (*Jimo de shiqisui* 寂寞的十七歲, 1967), Pai returned to Golden Horse the following year with a romantic comedy, *The Bride and I* (*Xinniang yuwo* 新娘與我, 1969), winning the best director and editing trophies, and the film became the second locally produced comedy since *Sweet Home* to receive the Golden Horse outstanding dramatic feature award.

Shortly after *The Bride and I*, Pai again collaborated with screen icon Chen Chen 甄珍 in *Accidental Trio* (*Jintian buhuijia* 今天不回家, 1969). Interweaving three parallel plotlines involving a young rebellious daughter, an unfaithful newlywed, and an exhausted father, Pai's subdued satire observed the pro-

³⁵ Ibid., 150.

³⁶ Ibid., 152.

³⁷ Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 302.

³⁸ At the 6th annual Golden Horse Awards ceremony (1968), *Lonely Seventeen* won best director, editing, sound, cinematography (color), and production design (color), as well as a special technical award in cinematography.

tagonists' failed attempts to explore guilt, infidelity, and adultery. An escapist melodrama that gently challenged traditional values using understated humor and momentary absurdity, *Accidental Trio* became one of Taiwan's top-grossing films of 1969, generating more than two million Taiwan dollars (TWD).³⁹ Despite its popularity, the KMT administration considered *Accidental Trio* and its provocative title—which literally translates as “today not coming home”—as corrupting and threatening to the moral values of a healthy society. The film's theme song of the same title was consequently banned, forcing the label company Haishan Records 海山唱片 to re-release a modified soundtrack album in 1970 with a ludicrously revised title *Jintian yao huijia* 今天要回家 (“today must come home”).⁴⁰ Despite the censorship mishaps, the title song was an instant hit and propelled the career of songstress Yao Su-rong 姚蘇蓉 to a new peak.

Accidental Trio was eventually snubbed at the Golden Horse Awards. But Pai soon returned with a vengeance: *Home Sweet Home* (*Jiazai taibei* 家在台北, 1970) received Golden Horse's top honor, the best dramatic feature award. Beloved actress Kuei Ya-lei 歸亞蕾 (a.k.a. Grace Gua Ah-leh) also took home her second trophy for best acting. Though it was, strictly speaking, a melodrama with limited comical moments, Pai's satirical mockery and restrained humor gave *Home Sweet Home* a lingering sweeter-than-bitter aftertaste that more than justified its Golden Horse laurel.

INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION AND THE POPULARITY OF MILITARY COMEDIES

More than two decades after Chiang Kai-shek had retreated to Taiwan, his promise of retaking mainland China by force was sounding more futile than achievable, and the rest of the world was warming to the idea of legitimizing Communist China. In October, 1971, Taiwan's permanent founding-member seat as the Republic of China at the United Nations was given to the communist-ruled People's Republic of China (PRC). Within less than a year, as many as twenty-seven former allies across continents including Japan, Belgium, and Mexico abruptly discontinued formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan to seek new relationships with the PRC.⁴¹ On the last evening of his visit to mainland China

³⁹ Jian-ye Huang, ed., *Kua shiji Taiwan dianying shilu 1898–2000*, vol. 2 (Taipei: Chinese Taipei Film Archive, 2005), 598.

⁴⁰ “Jintian buhuijia changpian 今天不回家唱片,” National Museum of Taiwan History Online 台史博線上博物館, <http://the.nmth.gov.tw/nmth/zh-TW/Item/Detail/ffd0140e-b72f-436b-9ad3-9a9a2cbcf6ee> (accessed July 24, 2022).

⁴¹ Lu, *Taiwan dianying: Zhengzhi, jingji, meixue*, 180.

on February 27, 1972, United States president Richard Nixon signed the Shanghai Communiqué, affirming America's interest in a "peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves" and declared the "ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all US forces and military installations in Taiwan."⁴² The shock of losing a top ally and its military protection drove Taiwan into a state of existential crisis. Sentiments of uncertainty and hopelessness intensified as Chiang Kai-shek passed away on April 5, 1975. Dealing the last blow to Taiwan, on January 1, 1979, United States President Jimmy Carter established official relations with the PRC, leaving Taiwan's seventeen million inhabitants⁴³ in a gloomy cloud of fear, distress, and existential vulnerability.

As Taiwan succumbed to the brutal realization of its international isolation in the 1970s, policy films promoting patriotism and nationalism were released in droves by state-run studios. Meanwhile, escapist romantic melodramas—many adapted from popular novels written by Chiung Yao 瓊瑤—continued to dominate the box office. In 1979, director Chang Pei-Cheng 張佩成 delivered one of Taiwan's most popular military comedies, *Off to Success* (*Chengongling shang* 成功嶺上). A big-budget patriotic propaganda film with CMPC's financial backing, *Off to Success* boasted one of the largest ensemble casts ever seen in Taiwanese films, featuring rumored rivals and A-list icons Joan Lin 林鳳嬌 and Brigitte Lin 林青霞⁴⁴ in their first on-screen collaboration. A coming-of-age comedy taking place at the Chengongling 成功嶺 army training camp, *Off to Success* is a fun-filled caricature of Taiwan's mandatory military rite of passage. Fully endorsed by the nationalist government and unconditionally supported by the military, this uplifting service comedy of gags and physical slapstick also managed to dispense a fitting amount of patriotism and political correctness. In the turbulent years after the Americans abandoned Taiwan, *Off to Success* provided much-needed comic relief to the islanders. Its huge success sparked off a production boom of numerous military comedies, and launched the film career of its hilariously entertaining supporting actor Hsu Pu-liao 許不了 (1951–1985), arguably the most talented comedian in Taiwan's cinema history.

⁴² "203. Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China." United States Department of State: Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203> (accessed July 24, 2022).

⁴³ "Taiwan at a Glance," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1979, Section A, Page 8, <http://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/10/archives/taiwan-at-a-glance-geography-population-history-government-armed.html> (accessed July 24, 2022).

⁴⁴ Brigitte Lin, Joan Lin, Charlie Chin Hsiang-lin 秦祥林 (also starring in *Off to Success*), and Chin Han 秦漢 were Taiwan's biggest screen icons of the 1970s, known as *Erlin erqin* 二林二秦 (Two Lins, Two Chins).

THE RISE AND DEMISE OF TAIWAN'S CHAPLIN: HSU PU-LIAO

Born Ye Tie-xiong 葉鐵雄, Hsu Pu-liao is known by his oddball screen name (meant to be pronounced in *taiyu*), which means “suffering endlessly” (khóo-buē-liáu 苦未了). The playful alias came from a supporting role he played in the *taiyu* television drama series *Leifeng Pagoda* (*Leifengta* 雷峰塔, 1977).⁴⁵ After his breakout performance in *Off to Success*, Hsu became a sought-after lead actor and appeared in numerous features including romantic comedy *Up Stairs and Down Stairs* (*Lou Shang Lou Xia* 樓上樓下, 1979), written and directed by veteran filmmaker Ting Shan-hsi 丁善璽 (1935–2009). Then came his career big break *The Clown* (*Xiaochou* 小丑, 1980), a low-budget debut from writer/director Kevin Chu 朱延平 (a.k.a. Chu Yen-ping; b. 1950) showcasing Hsu in the title role as an unpopular stage clown who falls desperately in love with a blind girl and gives up all his savings to pay for her eye surgery. In a performance reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin in *City Lights* (1931), Hsu rightfully earned the nickname “Taiwan’s Chaplin” even though he is said never to have seen a Chaplin film prior to *The Clown*.⁴⁶ Instantly elevated to superstardom with *The Clown*, Hsu saw his paycheck soar from NT\$10,000 to NT\$2.5 million per film.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the tremendous success soon turned into a life-threatening nightmare when predatory film investors with ties to organized crime came knocking on his door.

After *The Clown*, Hsu Pu-liao starred in eight films in 1980, then ten films the next year including his impressive (and singular) directorial effort, *The Taxi Driver* (*Jidan shitou peng* 雞蛋石頭碰, 1981).⁴⁸ Coerced into working nonstop, he headlined thirteen films in 1982, and eleven more in 1983. In order to force Hsu to work around the clock, the mob got him addicted to narcotics and successfully placed him under twenty-four-hour control.⁴⁹ In just a few years, his health deteriorated rapidly. In despair, Hsu attempted suicide,⁵⁰ and in one instance he ran off from work before being caught and brought back to the set. In 1984, Hsu was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and other severe illnesses. Even though his health was irreversibly failing, Hsu managed to star in ten more films before he passed away from cirrhosis-related heart failure on July 3, 1985. He was thirty-four. According to Kevin Chu, who directed Hsu’s last film

⁴⁵ Produced by and aired on China Television (*Zhongguo dianshi gongsi* 中國電視公司).

⁴⁶ Wang, George Chun Han 王君瀚. “Taiwan’s King of Comedy: An Interview with Kevin Chu (Chu Yen-ping),” in *Asia Laughs: A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia (Udine: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011), 175.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴⁸ *The Taxi Driver* was made for financiers associated with martial-arts superstar Jimmy Wang Yu 王羽 (1943–2022), who has long been known to have triad connections.

⁴⁹ Wang, “Taiwan’s King of Comedy,” 176.

⁵⁰ Huang, “*The Chronicle of Taiwan Cinema*,” 930.

The Clown and the Swan (*Xiaochu yu tianer* 小丑與天鵝, 1985), “a day after the entire island learned of Hsu’s death, *The Clown and the Swan* premiered nationwide. Tens of thousands of sad fans crowded the theaters in Taipei... within the first three minutes, every audience member had tears in their eyes.”⁵¹ An exceptional comedian whose mere presence would turn a mediocre film into a box office goldmine, in his short-lived but dazzling film career from 1979 to 1985, Hsu Pu-liao inexhaustibly kept moviegoers entertained in sixty-four films, the vast majority of them comedies.

Owing his early-career accomplishment to Hsu,⁵² Kevin Chu continued with an extremely successful collection of blockbuster films after Hsu’s death. Specializing in crowd-pleasing comedies for all ages, Chu directed or produced one record-breaking movie after another for the rest of the 1980s, earning him the title of Taiwan’s king of comedy. Local audiences flocked to theatres to see films bearing the Kevin Chu label, among them the tremendously popular *Kung Fu Kids* (*Haioxiaozi* 好小子, 1985),⁵³ a martial arts family comedy that spawned nine sequels.

NEW CINEMA COMEDIES & THE POST-MARTIAL LAW YEARS

In 1981, legendary auteur King Hu (1932–1997) made his first contemporary comedy film *The Juvenizer* (*Zhongshen dashi* 終身大事, 1981) in Taiwan. A drastic departure from his acclaimed wuxia oeuvre, this was Hu’s satirical treatment of Taipei’s materialistic health-crazed middle class, drowning in the futile pursuit of eternal youth and momentary romances. Regrettably, Hu’s first jab at comedy filmmaking failed to resonate with the audience, and *The Juvenizer* became the forgotten film that expedited the decline⁵⁴ of his remarkable career. Meanwhile, a quiet rejuvenation of local cinema was fast taking shape. Aspiring to tell down-to-earth stories that truthfully reflect and authentically explore the unique experience of Taiwan, a younger generation of local film talents rose to prominence in the early 1980s and stirred up a wave known as Taiwan’s New Cinema 新電影 movement.

⁵¹ Wang, “Taiwan’s King of Comedy,” 177.

⁵² “My success had been dependent on (Hsu) up to that point (Hsu’s death).” From Wang, “Taiwan’s King of Comedy,” 177.

⁵³ Initiated by Kevin Chu but given to his friend Chang Mei-chun 張美君 to direct. However, Chang became gravely ill after the first day of production and passed away during principal photography. Chu immediately took on directing duties and finished the film. From Wang, “Taiwan’s King of Comedy,” 178.

⁵⁴ George Chun Han Wang, “King Hu and Run Run Shaw: the clash of two cinema legends,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 2 (2010), 139.



Fig. 1 King Hu directing actress Sylvia Chang in *The Juvenizer* in Taipei, Taiwan, 1981 (Photo courtesy of the King Hu Foundation USA).



Fig. 2 King Hu (left) directing his first comedy film *The Juvenizer* in Taipei, Taiwan, 1981 (Photo courtesy of the King Hu Foundation USA).

One of the New Cinema's earliest releases was *The Sandwich Man* (*Erzi de dawanou* 兒子的大玩偶, 1983, Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢, Tseng Chuang-Hsiang 曾壯祥, Wan Ren 萬仁), the first screen adaptation of the novels of Taiwan's xiangtu wenxue 鄉土文學 (nativist literature) forerunner Huang Chun-ming 黃春明 (b. 1935). The last of the three vignettes in this anthology film—*The Taste of Apples* (*Pingguo de ziwei* 蘋果的滋味), directed by Wan Jen 萬仁 (b. 1950)—is a bitter-sweet comedy about the awkward privilege a laborer and his impoverished family come to enjoy after being hit by a vehicle driven by an American military officer stationed in Taiwan. Viewers were taken on an eye-opening limou-

sine ride with the laborer's grumbling wife and five children, relocated from their shantytown abode to a palatial American hospital adorned with amenities including a pile of pricy red apples they'd never tasted before. As New Cinema's first satirical comedy, the tri-lingual (*guoyu*, *taiyu*, and English) short film playfully poked fun at Taiwan's love-hate relationship with Americans, and became the only segment of the anthology to face censorship threats.⁵⁵ Eventually *The Sandwich Man* was released intact, and went on to enjoy critical acclaim. It is widely considered to be the film that put Taiwan's New Cinema on the map of world cinema.⁵⁶

The New Cinema's most lauded comedy arrived in 1987 when frontrunner Wang Tung 王童 (a.k.a. Wang Toon; b. 1942) delivered a sentimental satire in his powerful war comedy *Strawman* (*Daocaoren* 稻草人, 1987). In an engaging tale set in Japanese-colonized Taiwan during WWII, two naïve brothers find an undetonated American bomb on their farmland. Anticipating big rewards, they haul it all the way to the city only to be reprimanded by the terrified Japanese police chief who orders them to immediately dispose of the bomb. As they sadly throw the bomb off a cliff, the dud explodes underwater with a powerful blast that kills more fish than the jubilant brothers can carry back home, where they generously share the delicious bounty with all villagers. Poignant, witty, and at times tearfully funny, *Strawman* received three Golden Horses including best director, best original screenplay, and the best dramatic feature award, becoming Taiwan's second comedy film to win the Golden Horse top honor since *Home Sweet Home*.

Taiwan's martial law was eventually repealed in 1987,⁵⁷ ending almost four decades of repression and political censorship. Shortly after November 2, 1987, the KMT administration began to allow Taiwan's residents to make family-reunion travels to mainland China.⁵⁸ For the first time since they had come to Taiwan in the 1940s, first-generation mainlanders, mostly in their fifties and sixties, could finally visit their family homes and relatives. In 1989, Wang Tung reprised his engaging combination of humor and sentimentalism in the tragicomic melodrama *Banana Paradise* (*Xiangjiao tiantang* 香蕉天堂, 1989). Teaming up again with *Strawman* scriptwriter Wang Shaudi 王小棣, he produced a film that chronicles the life of a mainland peasant who uses false identities to survive and manages to make a decent living for decades until the China travel

⁵⁵ Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 294.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁵⁷ Taiwan's 38-year-long martial law was lifted on July 15, 1987.

⁵⁸ Daniel Southeri, "Taiwan to End 38-Year Ban on Travel to Mainland China." *The Washington Post*. September 20, 1987, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1987/09/20/taiwan-to-end-38-year-ban-on-travel-to-mainland-china/7e409425-46a6-4390-9034-8668640a64b6> (accessed July 26, 2022).

ban is lifted and he is asked to reunite with a father in China he is not related to, which would expose his true identity. Blending tears with momentary laughter, *Banana Paradise* is a farcical account of the collective experience of first-generation mainlanders in Taiwan who endured four lonely decades of separation from their loved ones in their hometowns in China.

The second wave of Taiwan's New Cinema began in the 1990s, with three remarkable comedies from Ang Lee 李安 (b. 1954). In his "Father Knows Best" trilogy, including *Pushing Hands* (*Tuishou* 推手, 1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (*Xiyen* 囍宴, 1993), and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (*Yinshi nannu* 飲食男女, 1994), Lee masterfully examined cultural clashes and generational confrontations through his delightfully whimsical lens. As Taiwan's first gay comedy feature, *The Wedding Banquet* received the Golden Bear top prize at the 1993 Berlin International Film Festival, scoring a third recognition for Taiwan at the Big Three film festivals following King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (*Grand prix de la Commission supérieure technique*, Cannes, 1975) and Hou Hsiao Hsien's 侯孝賢 (b. 1947) *A City of Sadness* (*Beiqing chengshi* 悲情城市, 1989) (Golden Lion, Venice, 1989). At home, *The Wedding Banquet* received five Golden Horse awards including best dramatic feature, the third Taiwanese comedy to win this top honor. Lee also earned Taiwan cinema a permanent place in the history of the Oscars with back-to-back nominations for *The Wedding Banquet* and *Eat Drink Man Woman* in the Academy Awards best foreign language film category,⁵⁹ before eventually winning the honor with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong* 臥虎藏龍, 2000). Renowned auteur Edward Yang 楊德昌 (1947–2007) also charmed world festival crowds with his urban satire *A Confucian Confusion* (*Duli shidai* 獨立時代, 1994), an *in-competition* selection in Cannes; followed by his dark satirical dramedy *Majiang* (*Mahjong* 麻將, 1996), which received an honorable mention in Berlin.

DOWNTURN AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Taiwan's film industry began its downward spiral in the mid-1990s⁶⁰ on the back of extensive video piracy and fierce competition with big-budget foreign imports.⁶¹ While New Cinema auteurs were enjoying accolades at major festivals,

⁵⁹ The Academy Award "Best Foreign Language Film" category was renamed "Best International Feature Film" in 2020.

⁶⁰ Taiwan cinema's long-term recession began in the late 1980s as nativist films became less popular. From Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, 296.

⁶¹ George Chun Han Wang 王君瀚, "No Signs of Slowing Down: The Renaissance of Taiwanese Cinema," in *Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival Program Book*, ed. Abraham Ferrer (Los Angeles: Visual Communications, 2012), 26.

arthouse films such as Tsai Ming-liang's 蔡明亮 (b. 1957) Venice Golden Lion winner *Vive l'Amour* (*Aiqing wansui* 愛情萬歲, 1994) were evidently too abstract and unappealing for local box offices. Only a small number of domestic productions were profitable. Many of these, such as *No, Sir!* (*Baogao banzhang 3* 報告班長三, 1994), a sequel to megahit *Yes, Sir!* (*Baogao banzhang* 報告班長, 1987) which spawned six sequels in total, all but the last of which were directed by Chin Ao-Hsun 金鰲勳 (1947–2013), were from mid-to-low budget franchises. Meanwhile, Kevin Chu continued to produce chart-topping *Kung Fu Kids*-inspired comedies featuring adorably invincible child martial arts prodigies like *Shaolin Popey* (*Shaolin xiaozi* 笑林小子, 1994) and sequel *Shaolin Popey II: Messy Temple* (*Shaolin xiaozi II Xinwulongyuan* 笑林小子 II 新烏龍院, 1994). Among the numerous mediocre hits were several exceptional comedic gems, such as *Tropical Fish* (*Redaiyu* 熱帶魚, 1994), the feature debut of Chen Yu-hsun 陳玉勳 (b. 1962) that won the Golden Horse original screenplay and supporting actress awards, and *Tonight Nobody Goes Home* (*Jintian buhuijia* 今天不回家, 1996)—bearing the same Chinese title as *Accidental Trio*—Sylvia Chang's 張艾嘉 (b. 1953) tribute to Pai Ching-jui's once controversial classic. Chang's version retained an energized rendition of *Accidental Trio's* timeless theme song, performed by cast member and cantopop idol Alex To 杜德偉 (a.k.a. To Tak-wai).

Founded in 1986, shortly before the end of martial law, Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (*Minzhu jinbudang* 民主進步黨) (hereafter DPP) quickly emerged to become the major political opponent of the ruling KMT. In 2000, DPP presidential candidate Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (b. 1950) defeated his KMT counterpart James Soong Chu-yu 宋楚瑜 (b. 1942), marking a historical end to the KMT's fifty-five-year governance. As one of Chen's top priorities was for Taiwan to regain legitimate international standing, in a desperate bid to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the DPP government succumbed to pressure from the United States⁶² and officially lifted its quota on foreign film imports in 2001. Already distressed from the lack of domestic hits, Taiwan's fragile film industry was further devastated by the unlimited import of Hollywood blockbusters. Then came the epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, causing year-over-year box office sales to drop more than sixteen percent.⁶³ In 2005, the KMT-operated CMPC was sold off to the private sector,⁶⁴ marking the demise of a major studio behind some of Taiwan's most memorable titles.

⁶² Lee, *Historical Dictionary of Taiwan Cinema*, xxxix.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

One exceptional hit was released during these recession-stricken years. *Formula 17* (*Shiqisui detiankong* 十七歲的天空, 2004), a gay romantic comedy directed by Chen Ying-jung 陳映蓉 (b. 1980), was the highest grossing domestic production in 2004.⁶⁵ Eleven years after *The Wedding Banquet* ridiculed the fraught existence of a closeted couple, *Formula 17* proudly portrayed local gay youths living openly as their true selves. Chen's feature debut also captured historic footage of *Taipei Pride*, the island's first ever pride parade that took place on November 1, 2003. The film's widespread success was a genuine reflection of Taiwan's growing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and their equal rights.

A RENAISSANCE SPEARHEADED BY BLOCKBUSTER COMEDIES

The revival of Taiwanese cinema was set in motion in 2008, when Wei Te-sheng 魏德聖 (b. 1969) enthralled local audiences with his feature debut *Cape No. 7* (*Haijiao Qihao* 海角七號), a musical comedy about a dejected musician rediscovering a sense of purpose by transforming a rock band of misfit amateurs into an overnight sensation. Interweaving this story with a subplot involving the search for a local addressee of some love letters from Japan undelivered for some sixty years, Wei touched on Taiwan's conflicted emotions towards Japan, expressing nostalgic sentiments for the colonial era. The sleeper hit became a must-see event across all demographics. During its four-month theatrical run, *Cape No. 7* raked in 530 million TWD domestically, setting an all-time box office record for a Taiwanese film. Fittingly, it took a comedy to ignite some much-needed optimism regarding Taiwan's struggling motion picture industry, proving that in good times and in bad, the power of laughter can always bring back even the long-lost audiences of years past and put a heartfelt smile on their faces.

Former Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九 defeated DPP opponent Frank Hsieh 謝長廷 in Taiwan's 2008 presidential election, giving the KMT a second chance to govern the islands. Eager to revive Taiwan's sagging economy, Ma's China-friendly administration signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (*Haixialiangang jingjihezuo jiaqouxieyi* 海峽兩岸經濟合作架構協議) (hereafter ECFA) with China. The 2010 free trade agreement excludes Taiwan from China's annual quota for foreign film imports, thus opening up the enormous Chinese film market to Taiwanese filmmakers. Taking advantage of the ECFA, the first Taiwanese film distributed in mainland China was the foodie comedy *Night Market Hero* (*Jipai yingxiong* 雞排英雄, 2011) starring popular

⁶⁵ Hsiao Tsai-wei 蕭采薇, "Haijide 'Shiqisui detiankong' ma? 還記得 '十七歲的天空' 嗎?" *ET Today*, March 23, 2021, <http://star.ettoday.net/news/1944891> (accessed July 28, 2022).

grassroots comedian Chu Ke-liang 豬哥亮. A whimsical tale about underdog food vendors reclaiming their outdated marketplace from corrupt developers, this Nelson Yeh 葉天倫 (b. 1975) debut was the third Taiwanese film⁶⁶ to march across the 100-million threshold, grossing an impressive 128 million TWD domestically. Another foodie favorite, *Zone Pro Site* (*Zongpushi* 總舖師, 2013), Chen Yu-hsun's absurdist comedy about Taiwan's competitive outdoor catering business, also crossed the 100-million mark domestically in 2013 and was showcased at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival.

The biggest hits of the decade were a pair of nostalgic young adult comedies. Adapting his semi-autobiographical bestseller, novelist Giddens Ko's 九把刀 (b. 1978) directorial debut *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (*Naxienian womenyiqizhuidenuhai* 那些年，我們一起追的女孩, 2011), a coming-of-age comedy about brazen highschoolers' romantic pursuits, pulled in 400 million TWD in domestic sales and conquered box offices in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. In mainland China, although some content—including the raising of an ROC flag—was deleted to clear censorship,⁶⁷ the hit raked in seventy-one million CNY, defeating *Cape No. 7* to become the best-selling Taiwanese film in China.⁶⁸ Director Chen Yu-shan's 陳玉珊 (b. 1974) *Our Times* (*Wodeshaonushidai* 我的少女時代, 2015), another high school romantic comedy, generated 410 million TWD⁶⁹ in 2015 and became an instant hit in Hong Kong, Singapore, and mainland China. A year later, Chung Mong-Hong's 鍾孟宏 (b. 1965) dark comedy *Godspeed* (*Yilu shunfeng* 一路順風, 2016) premiered to acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival. The road movie starring Hong Kong's legendary comedian Michael Hui 許冠文 was nominated in eight Golden Horse categories,⁷⁰ and received the 2017 Hong Kong Film Award for Best Film from Mainland and Taiwan.

FLOURISHING LGBTQ+ AND ROMANTIC COMEDIES

In 2016, former DPP party chair Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 became Taiwan's first female president. While cross-strait tensions escalated as Tsai advocated for more global participation and recognition, her socially liberal stewardship ensured accelerated advancement for Taiwan's equal rights movement. On May 24, 2019, same-sex marriage was legalized in Taiwan, marking a historic first in

⁶⁶ Behind *Cape No. 7* (530 million TWD) and Doze Niu's *Monga* (260 million TWD).

⁶⁷ “‘Naxienian’ zaodalushanhuamian” *Taiwan News*. <http://www.taiwannews.com.tw/ch/news/1806442> (accessed July 28, 2022).

⁶⁸ Wang, *No Signs of Slowing Down: The renaissance of Taiwanese Cinema*, 28.

⁶⁹ Pin-chuan Chen ed., *2016 Taiwan Cinema Yearbook* (Taipei: Taiwan Film Institute 2016), 321.

⁷⁰ Although it ultimately only won the award for best art director.

Asia. LGBTQ+ comedies released in the years leading up to Taiwan's marriage equality include Wei Te-sheng's musical *52 Hz I Love You* (*52 Heziwoaini 52 赫茲我愛你*, 2017), featuring a subplot involving a lesbian couple fighting hard to be included in a municipal wedding ceremony, and *Dear Ex* (*Sheixianaishangtade 誰先愛上他的*, 2018), an emotional yet lighthearted comedy about a widow's battle against her deceased husband's gay lover through the eyes of her teenage son. Co-directed by Meg Hsu 徐譽庭 (b. 1966) and Hsu Chih-yen 許智彥 (b. 1985), *Dear Ex* won the best feature, actor, and actress awards at the 20th Taipei Film Festival, and picked up the best actress, editing, and original song Golden Horse trophies amidst its impressive eight nominations.

Remaining relatively unscathed by the coronavirus pandemic,⁷¹ the 57th Golden Horse Awards was held live in Taipei on November 21, 2020. With eleven nominations, Chen Yu-hsun's *My Missing Valentine* (*Xiaoshide qingrenjie 消失的情人節*, 2020) collected five wins including best director, original screenplay, and the best dramatic feature award. As the fourth Taiwanese comedy to win the Golden Horse top honor following *Home Sweet Home*, *Strawman*,⁷² and *The Wedding Banquet*, Chen's fantasy rom-com lacked the tenacity, relevance, and sarcasm that made its predecessors timeless. Nonetheless, *My Missing Valentine* received a Black Dragon critics award at the 2021 Udine Far East Film Festival, and the best narrative feature prize at the 2021 Taipei Film Festival. Also delivering much-needed comic relief during the pandemic was another romantic fantasy, *Till We Meet Again* (*Yuelao 月老*, 2021). The Giddens Ko comedy received eleven Golden Horse nominations⁷³ and a best director nod at the 2022 Taipei Film Festival awards ceremony, where veteran filmmaker Kevin Chu was named the recipient of its Outstanding Contribution Award.

As pandemic lockdowns have boosted streaming subscriptions, made-in-Taiwan content has gained rising prominence on global streaming platforms. *Dear Ex* is available on Netflix. *Till We Meet Again* is on Disney+. The winner of the 2022 Taipei Film Festival audience award, *Mom, Don't Do That! (Ma, bienaole! 媽, 別鬧了! 2022*, Chen Huiling 陳慧翎, Li Junhong 李俊宏), a romantic-comedy series adapted from Chen Ming-ming's 陳名珉 novel *My Mother's Interracial Marriage* (*我媽的異國婚姻*, 2018), has been streaming on Netflix globally since July, 2022.

⁷¹ "Taiwan has recorded only 611 cases of the coronavirus and just seven deaths." From Wu Huizhong, "My Missing Valentine wins big at Golden Horse Awards," ABC News, November 21, 2020, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory/missing-valentine-headlines-golden-horse-awards-74332820> (accessed July 30, 2022).

⁷² Chen Yu-hsun was an intern for *Strawman* writer Wang Shaudi.

⁷³ *Till We Meet Again* only won three Golden Horse technical awards, in sound, costume design, and visual effects.

NEXT GENERATION, NEW HOPE

Through humor and laughter and a distinctive grassroots flavor, Taiwan's comedy cinema has faithfully documented Formosa's impressive transformation through intricate political turmoil, rapid industrialization, and progressive democratic reforms. In good times and bad, Taiwanese audiences have been gratefully served with continuous courses of comedy delights that have intersected with their life experience and shared memories. The unique ingredients that generated mountains of laughter came from the island's diverse vernacular characteristics inspired by indigenous, Hakka, mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese influences. Since *Everybody's Happy*, theatergoers have daringly journeyed with Brothers Wang and Liu, laughed and cried with Hsu Pu-liao, shouted patriotic slogans with *Off to Success* rookies, and happily sung along with the misfits in *Cape No. 7*. For seven decades, Taiwan's comedy cinema has been consistently the strongest genre performer in the island's box office history. Currently, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, Taiwan is engulfed in uncertainties from a lingering pandemic, a looming global recession, and the escalating tensions with mainland China. This new round of difficult spells, as in the past, will undoubtedly inspire and motivate Taiwan's next generation of filmmakers to produce more unforgettable comedies to keep the islanders well entertained. Unlike their early predecessors, who experienced pain and hardship during Taiwan's not-so-distant past under Japanese colonial rule and Chiang Kai-shek's oppressive regime, the island's future filmmakers have been born, raised, and nurtured in the world's most democratic Chinese-speaking society. Empowered with unprecedented equality, freedom, and civil rights, they have access to abundant technical, intellectual, and financial resources. They have the island's rich cinematic heritage to draw from, the world's massive Chinese populations to speak to, and a growing international fan base to appeal to. Armed with the most educated, fearless, and outspoken generation of visual storytellers Taiwan has ever fostered, it is to be hoped that comedy cinema from Taiwan will continue to fill big screens, home screens, and streaming platforms worldwide for many decades to come.

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