Are Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Films Political?
A Study of Gender, Culture, History and Aesthetics in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Historical Films

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

(Signature)
Acknowledgements

I came to Australia nine years ago, driven by a thirst for knowledge and a drive to find and create myself. During the past nine years, I have had to overcome the language barrier, deal with cultural shocks, become accustomed to the different style of living, and learn to interact with people from different countries around the world.

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Abstract

Hou Hsiao-hsien is one of the most controversial film directors in Taiwan. His proponents love him for his artistic and poetic film style of narrating history. The government hated him for his involvement in politics. Regardless of their contentiousness, his films are widely acclaimed and worthy of close analysis.

This thesis engages with Taiwanese history by offering a reading of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness* (1989), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), and *Three Times* (2005). I critique the films’ historical dimensions, cultural representations and approach to gender issues in the period from the late Qing Dynasty to the present. In addition, Hou’s film aesthetics and cinematography are analysed, through comparisons with the work of Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, in order to explore the influences of Japanese colonisation and Chinese cultural and ethnic connection. Hou’s immense contribution to Taiwanese film consists principally of a Taiwanese trilogy that traces Taiwan’s history in the twentieth century. In *The Puppetmaster* (1993), Hou details the era of Japanese colonisation from 1895 to the restoration of Taiwan by the Kuomintang in 1945. *A City of Sadness* focuses on the fate of the Lin family from 1945 to 1949, which epitomises Taiwanese life during the initial stages of Kuomintang domination. *Good Men, Good Women* (1995) portrays two different eras in Taiwan: the political movement in the 1950s and pop culture in the 1990s. In Hou’s later work, *Three Times* (not part of this trilogy), Hou uses subtle techniques to give a brief historical retrospective through the respective love stories of three women. The thesis uses examples from not only the above films but also Hou’s initial romantic trilogy, *Cute Girl* (1980), *Cheerful Wind* (1981), and *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982) and his first realistic
film, *Son’s Big Doll*, which is featured in the omnibus film *The Sandwich Man*, to explore Hou’s historical, cultural and gender representations. In order to understand Hou’s ideas and beliefs in greater depth, I also review the documentary, *The Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (Olivier Assayas, 1997) as well as his films in the last decade, such as *Café Lumière* (2003), *The Electric Princess House* (2007), *Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge* (2008) and *La Belle Époque* (2011).

In this thesis, I explore the notion of macro-history (official history) and micro-history (family and women’s stories) and the interrelationship between them. I provide my own illustrative family photos and handwritten documents of my grandfather and uncle to show the parallel between my family story and Hou’s depiction of the impact of cultural hegemony on family history (micro-history).

In *A City of Sadness*, with reference to Julia Kristeva’s (1986) notion of ‘feminine time’ and the debate between Emilie Yeh (2000) and Mizou (1991) concerning “whether women can really enter history,” I argue that Hou Hsiao-hsien’s use of a family’s micro-history to parallel the national macro-history of the February 28 Incident opens an important historical window through which the audience may re-encounter and reflect upon Taiwan’s past, and think carefully about its future. As distinct from Mizou and Yeh, I propose that it is possible for micro-history and macro-history to co-exist, based on the theory of *yin* and *yang*.

In *Good Men, Good Women*, putting Wu Jia-chi’s and Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s theories on media and memory alongside one another, I question how useful it is to discuss Hou’s use of women in cinema and “film within a film” to represent history and, more importantly, whether this is a reliable approach. Can it be seen as a national allegory?

In the discussion of *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*, I bridge the gap between Nick Browne (2000) and Li Zhen-ya’s (2000) debate about whether Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films are depoliticised. I argue that Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films are political and that his humanitarian
concerns should not be ignored. I have also argued that there is a reason for Hou’s poetic style of narration and indirectness, which is chiefly to avoid censorship.

To discover the truth, to reconcile and to produce harmony are the primary aims of Hou Hsiao-hsien. Hou’s films suggest that the Taiwanese people should cast away the darkness of the past and face the bright future, as they have understood their history and take a forgiving attitude toward past misfortunes.
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Introduction

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind (Dickinson, 2002, p. 81)

Because we cannot bear to part, human beings have literature and art. Then, we have all possibilities (Hou cited in Ge, 2004, A2).¹

Hou Hsiao-hsien is one of the most controversial film directors in Taiwan. His proponents love him for his artistic and poetic film style of narrating history. The government hated him for his involvement with politics. Regardless, his films are widely acclaimed and worthy of close analysis.

In 1989, through his controversial film A City of Sadness (1989), the director Hou Hsiao-hsien called upon the Taiwanese people to recollect their erased memories of the turbulent years 1945–1949. This film has been criticised by some as problematic due to its inaccurate representation of the historical past.² Wu Hao-ren (1991) noted that,

Hou did not experience the heartbreaking February 28 Incident himself; he lacks historical knowledge and can only rely on his collaborators (Chu Tian-wen, Wu Nian-zhen, Zhang Da-chun and Zhan Hong-zhi). Maybe they are superior to the others in literature or marketing. However, when it comes to the interpretation of Taiwan’s history, it is beyond their reach (pp. 92–93).³

¹ My translation.
³ My translation.
The relative of one of the political victims, Xu Shi-xiong, regards the film as expressing the bravery of levelling accusations against the Kuomintang (KMT) (勇敢地控訴了統治者). Inspired by *A City of Sadness*, the victim’s family were able to restore their dignity and confidence (Lin, 1991, p. 104).⁴

In addition to the political implications of the film, it can be argued that Hou’s achievements in his films derive from his poetic style of the historical narrative and objective views about life and death. In this thesis, I undertake a retrospective of Taiwan’s history through the lens of Hou’s oeuvre: first, I address the February 28 Incident, through an analysis of *A City of Sadness*; second, I examine the period of Japanese colonisation as depicted in *The Puppetmaster* (1993); third, I investigate the so-called White Terror carried out by the KMT and represented in *Good Men, Good Women* (1995)⁵; and finally, I analyse the film trilogy released in 2005, entitled *Three Times* (2005), which spans the era between 1895 and 2005 in Taiwan and focuses on women’s experiences of that historical period.

While some critics, like James Udden (2009), have suggested that the trilogy is an extension of Hou’s previous films, I argue that Hou’s later films have evolved and represent a great departure from his previous works.

This thesis explores Taiwan’s indigenous culture and the impact of Japanese and Chinese cultural practices, in addition to the gender issues explored in Hou’s films, specifically *A City of Sadness, The Puppetmaster, Good Men, Good Women* and *Three Times*. I intend to focus on these films in order to offer a representation of Taiwan culturally, historically, and politically. The primary reason for selecting the above-mentioned cinematic texts in particular relates to the fact that they appear to depict the stories of families and/or women’s while at the same time participating in a political narrative through a depiction of

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⁴ My translation.
⁵ Kuomintang [KMT] or Guomindang means the Chinese Nationalists.
Taiwan’s political history. I selected the films made following the lifting of martial law in 1987, which reveal the true colours of Hou Hsiao-hsien. Of these, I chose to focus not only on women-centred/family-oriented films set in Taiwan, but also those detailing the cultural, social and historical phenomena in Taiwan. I intend to examine if the personal is political as women’s marginalisation at home, domestic relegation to child-rearing, and so on are presented in *A City of Sadness, Good Men, Good Women, The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*. Because domesticity is sexually defined and segregated, it is presumed that women have no role or say in public life. This presumption seems to be subversion in Hou’s films as there is a thread of juxtaposition between micro-history and macro-history. Despite ongoing critical discussions regarding the impact of Hou’s films, they provide us with a platform from which to talk more openly about Taiwan’s past, to reflect on its present, and to reconsider its future.

In 1989, Hou received a prestigious Golden Lion Award in the 46th Venice Film Festival; in 2007 a Golden Leopard Award in the 60th Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland, and a Special Humanist Spirit award from UNESCO. However, he is not as well recognised internationally as the Taiwanese director Ang Lee, the Mainland Chinese director Zhang Yimou, or the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai. This lack of popular recognition corresponds with a gap in critical scholarship on Hou outside of Taiwan. There are several reasons for this: First, Hou’s films are art-house works that are popular at overseas film festivals but generally are not commercially successful, and thus they are seen only by small audiences. Second, his films deal with political events, such as the February 28 Incident and...

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6 Hou’s films have been awarded prizes from prestigious international festivals such as the Venice Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival, Hawaii International Film Festival and the Nantes Three Continents Festival. Six of his films to date have been nominated for the *Palme d’Or* (best film award) at the Cannes Film Festival, though the prize has so far eluded him. Hou was voted “Director of the Decade” for the 1990s in a poll of American and international critics put together by *The Village Voice* and *Film Comment*. Despite such acclaim, his work remains rarely distributed in the West outside of the film festival circuit. See The introduction to Hou Hsiao-hsien (n.d.). Retrieved 19 August, 2010, from
the White Terror, which remain somewhat hidden even within Taiwan and are thus not familiar to international audiences. Due to the limited availability of Hou’s films and the unfamiliarity of his subject matter, his works are often only cursorily examined in Western scholarship.

In this thesis, building on previous literature, I offer an in-depth engagement with Hou’s oeuvre, moving from his earliest film, *A City of Sadness*, to his most recent success with *Three Times*. As will be discussed in the literature review, the film critic Mizou (1991) has opined that Hou’s films avoid history, while Nick Browne has stated that Hou’s films do not have a political dimension (2000). Conversely, I examine Hou’s films in a comprehensive social, cultural, and historical context, drawing on the debate about the political dimension of Hou’s films to connect his cinematic texts to the social and political phenomena of Taiwan. As a result, the reader is offered a deeper understanding of Taiwan, not only in the past, but also in its current state. This historical and empirical contextualisation is complemented by an auto-ethnographic dimension of enquiry, whereby my personal family history is set in contrast with that depicted in Hou’s films *A City of Sadness* and *Good Men, Good Women*. This thesis thus bridges the gap between cinema and actual experience, and demonstrates how historical films influence Taiwanese people’s perspective of their national “skeleton in the closet.” In focusing on the political aspect of Hou’s films, I consider whether his humanitarian concerns are overstated, I discuss the historical implications of the works, and allow the reader to reflect on Taiwan’s past and the implications of this past for Taiwan’s future.

In Chapter One, I introduce Taiwan’s political context through both a macro-history (official history) and a micro-history (my family story). Then, I examine Hou’s biography in the context of Taiwanese history and reflect on how his historical films have changed my own

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou_Hsiao-Hsien
views on Taiwanese history. To better appreciate Hou’s films, it is important to understand who he is and his background. The director and his family never experienced the political events depicted in his films; Hou’s sources are predominantly from script writers Zhu Tian-wen and Wu Nian-zhen. Hou was initially an actor, then an assistant director, and finally a director. His first projects were commercial romantic films, such as *Cute Girl* (1980), *Cheerful Wind* (1981), and *Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982), and yet these too, under Hou’s lens, are more “realistic” in some ways. In *Cute Girl*, for example, characters rush off to the toilet; in *Cheerful Wind*, an actress abandons her director boyfriend and falls in love with a blind man; in *Green, Green Grass of Home* we see not so much romance blossoming between the main characters but more a representation of a nature-oriented life in the countryside (Lin, 2000, pp. 101–109). The above-mentioned are just some examples of Hou’s initial films. While his earlier films already included realistic parts of the plots, his co-directed fourth film, *The Sandwich Man* (1983) was a totally “realistic” film discussing the bitterness of a Taiwanese family in the 1960s because of economic problems.

Moving on from these early commercial projects to his more mature work, Hou began to focus more clearly on the political dimensions of his subject matter. For example, the film poster for *A City of Sadness* reads, “It is the most popular topic, and the most controversial film” – and indeed it is. For *A City of Sadness*, Hou won not only the Golden Bear Award but also a Humanist Spirit Award from UNESCO, and the film led the renowned film critic Peggy Jiao to state, “Hou is not only an artist with self-awareness, but also an historian with a mission”7 (1993, p. 3). However, if this is the case – if Hou is indeed a humanist, artist, and an historian – why then has he been so broadly criticised? In Chapter One I consider this question through an introductory discussion of Hou’s historical oeuvre alongside my own

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7 My translation.
family history. Further, the similarities and differences between the films of Hou and Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu will be examined, as some scholars have argued that Hou’s work resembles that of Yasujiro Ozu.

Chapter Two offers an interpretation of *A City of Sadness*, examining the role of women in Hou’s films and his understanding of their place as political actors. In this chapter, I use Mizou and Emilie Yeh as critical exemplars to address the question of whether women can enter history, through an analysis of sound and image. In Hou’s work, Chinese women seem alienated and isolated most of the time, which is a characteristic of Chinese films in general. As such, I have drawn a comparison between Hou’s films and the Fifth Generation Chinese film *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984); the Fifth Generation Chinese directors seek to effect change in China through their representations of the past (Berry, 1994), which is a concept I apply to Hou’s films in Chapter Two. I also reference *A City of Sadness* and *Yellow Earth* to explore the potential exclusion of women from history and, using the notion of *yin* and *yang* as an historical metaphor, I argue that her-story and his-story co-exist in Hou’s works as micro-history and macro-history, respectively. The Lin family’s story portrayed in *A City of Sadness* is both fictional and authentic, as demonstrated by the similarities I identify between a snapshot shown in the film and my grandfather’s family photograph.

Chapter Three takes as its theoretical base Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s work on photography in popular memory and applies this to the representation of women’s fragmented memories in *Good Men, Good Women*. Firstly, I explore the relationship between memory and technology (i.e. photography and film) and, secondly, I discuss whether the representation of memory is created by the aesthetics of film and the impact of collage. I ask whether the media are impartial in their recreation of the past. These two considerations are then united in a discussion of the affective dimensions and emotional power of *Good Men, Good Women*. Through the use of diverse languages and family diaries, I demonstrate the
nationalism exhibited not only in *Good Men, Good Women* but also in Taiwan in general.

In Chapter Four I consider the use of indirectness in *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*, a film aesthetic that stems from Chinese culture. Hou uses indirectness to represent Taiwan’s history in a subtle way, rather than explicitly through language. Such a technique also acts to circumvent Taiwan’s culture of strict censorship: *A City of Sadness*, for example, was not banned in Taiwan because Hou presented it as a film about the Lin family and played down the political elements in his public presentation of the work. I then reference Chinese culture and its aesthetic code to decode Hou’s film’s political ideas, offering an analysis of the key scenes and a comparison between Hou’s *Three Times* and Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Gion Bayashi* (1953). Japan’s extensive influence on Taiwanese culture, as demonstrated by the analysis of the two aforementioned works, reveals the hidden political messages of not only the puppet master’s life but also that of the geisha.

In order to locate Hou’s films in an appropriate critical context, I will now provide a review of Hou’s reception by critics as well as my own views. As a Taiwanese born in the 1980s who moved to Australia nine years ago, my historical memory is informed by the violence of such event as the February 28 Incident involving Taiwanese Mainlanders and local Taiwanese. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2005) reminds us, the past is not dead but lives on within us in the knowledge formed from its representations in literature and the media. The past is an integral factor in the creation of the present and is in turn shaped by the roles that it plays (pp. 26–32). History is not passively received but is actively and constantly reconstructed by people as it circulates in the present. For example, Hou’s films raise questions from a new perspective to make the audience think about history. In a way, people create new perspectives in history. By watching Hou’s films, I think about my maternal grandfather’s suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the February 28 Incident. Something dreadful must have happened to my grandfather in post-War World II
Taiwan that I am always aware of. I remember that as a child, I could feel that my grandfather had some problems. Hou, in a way triggers me into thinking about the bitterness which my family dare not to talk about. This makes me try to understand what happened to my grandfather, and Hou’s films also give me an emotional sense of reality. I am creating my own new understanding of personal history. Stemming from the micro-history overpowering macro-history in Hou’s films, my personal history starts to develop because of the emotional projection to the characters in the films which have connections with the official history that reflects the yin and yang idea (they are inseparable) described in Chapter One.

Talking about the power of films, there is also a danger of them being used for political purposes by opportunistic politicians. For example, the former President Li Deng-hui went to the film premiere of A City of Sadness. Just after that night, one TV channel started to show the documentary of February 28 Incident. Taiwanese people started to talk about it and the discussion was almost endless. In 1995, Li Deng-hui apologised to the political victims of 228. In the same year, the former Taipei Mayer, Chen Shui-bian (who became the president between 2000 and 2008), changed Taipei New Park to 228 Memorial Park. This begging for forgiveness attitude about 228 from the government served the Democratic Progressive Party’s political propaganda during a general election.

My research echoes Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s statement that she is not searching for the historical truth but the ‘historical truthfulness’—‘an open-ended and evolving relationship with past events and people’ (2005, p. 27). As a Taiwanese studies researcher, I know that many Taiwanese families suffered from the February 28 Incident. I therefore find it important to examine Hou Hsiao-hsien’s historical films seeking “historical truthfulness.” It has little to do with what happened but much to do with what people believed. Historical truthfulness is what is believed to be true by the public. I seek to examine not only the relationship between the micro-history and macro-history in his films but also the relationship between my own
family history and Taiwan’s history. That is the way he tells the national history through his examination of the lives of individuals. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2005) writes, “the chains of relationships between media and audience may create obscurity as well as clarity, incomprehension as well as understanding, indifference as well as empathy” (p. 28). In Hou’s films, there is always an open ending. In a way, Hou is not providing an answer but raising a question. It is necessary to examine how authentic Hou’s historical films are since his attempt was to restore the complexity of history to the people who lived through it and to their descendants; to expand the official historical accounts of the formation of history, Hou is the facilitator to make the audience think carefully about history. The impact of the media could be stronger on people than could historical textbooks, which only showed the condensed history about the February 28 Incident and White Terror in my generation and my parents’ generation. Textbooks objectively talk about facts while films can evoke personal feelings in a way that helps the audience to connect the subjective history (personal history as micro-history) with the objective facts (macro-history) which had been disconnected by political factors. This disconnection, as a historical cleavage between the past and the present, is gradually bridged by Hou. By watching Hou’s films that arouse my emotional responses, I start to know not only where I come from but where the people of Taiwan come from. As a result, Hou helps the audience to reconstruct the knowledge of the past through the use of the film characters and breaks the ice about Taiwanese people’s feelings and comments on the February 28 Incident.

I have relied on several academic sources for an account of the historical details of the causes of the February 28 Incident. Chief among them are A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947 (Lai et al., 1991) and Formosa Betrayed (George Kerr, 1966). The latter especially details the repression of the KMT administration in Taiwan in the years just after World War II. The author of Formosa Betrayed, George Kerr, who served as vice
consul at the U.S. consulate in Taiwan during that time, provides detailed information on Chiang Kai-shek and General Chen Yi, the February 28 Incident, and many other subjects. They are useful books for readers to understand the background of the February 28 Incident and see how micro-history and macro-history are interrelated and interwoven. Michael Berry’s study, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (1983), presents a useful narrative of trauma in Chinese history starting from the Musha Incident in 1930, and continuing through the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, the February 28 Incident in 1947, the Cultural Revolution in 1968, Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, and the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Interestingly, Berry argues that local Taiwanese feel themselves to be *The Orphan of Asia* (*Yaxiya de Gu’er*), borrowing the expression from Wu Zhuoliu (1900–1976), because the people of Taiwan culturally and politically remain second-class citizens after the war. The reasons for this are complicated. One reason Berry (2008) offers is that,

Many Nationalists believed that China has suffered incalculable human loss (including the 300,000 victims of the Nanjing Massacre) in part so that Taiwan could finally be returned to the motherland. But the Taiwanese not only failed to appreciate their new “compatriots” sacrifice but also expressed great discontent, appearing almost nostalgic for the “good old days” of Japanese rule (p. 180).

Berry further argues that,

There were several layers of misunderstanding and miscommunication between the native Taiwanese population and the newly arrived “rulers” that contributed to the conflict. Tensions built around a multitude of issues ranging from linguistic incomprehensibility and intolerance (Taiwanese spoke primarily Japanese and Taiwanese, while the Mainlanders spoke Mandarin), corruption, and widespread corruption.

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8 Right to the present time, the Chinese government and the Japanese government hold different views about the death toll of the Nanjing massacre. Recently, the Nagoya Mayor, 河村隆之, stated that Nanjing Incident is not about a massacre of 300,000 Chinese people...I hope we [Japan and China] can have further discussion about this. His statement has caused the strong protest officially and unofficially in China. See Zhongyang she: Nanjing Da Tusha, Mingguwu Shizhang gai shuofa [Central news agency: Nanjing Massacre, Nagoya Mayor changed his statement]. (Tsao Huan, 2012). Retrieved 15 March, 2012, from [http://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E5%8D%97%E4%BA%AC%E5%A4%A7%E5%B1%A0%E6%AE%BA-%E5%90%8D%E5%8F%A4%E5%B1%8B%E5%B8%82%E9%95%B7%E6%94%B9%E8%AA%AA%E6%B3%95-132719216.html](http://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E5%8D%97%E4%BA%AC%E5%A4%A7%E5%B1%A0%E6%AE%BA-%E5%90%8D%E5%8F%A4%E5%B1%8B%E5%B8%82%E9%95%B7%E6%94%B9%E8%AA%AA%E6%B3%95-132719216.html) [my translation]
failure to employ Taiwanese in positions of power, all of which reinforced native feelings that they were being “recolonised” rather than “decolonised” (pp.180–181).

Another cause of the February 28 Incident Berry lists was the cultural and language difference between local Taiwanese and Taiwanese Mainlanders. He further argues:

If the Nanjing Massacre was the ultimate symbol of wartime Japanese atrocities, could the February 28 Incident—on the level of the national subconscious—be the ultimate form of vengeance, a grand incarnation of Ah Q’s spiritual victory complex (jingshen shengli fa 精神勝利法)? Since China was unable to continue the War of Resistance against Japan, were the former colonial subjects of Japan in Taiwan the next best thing? (Berry, 2008, p. 181)

Judging from Berry’s observation, the Nationalists in Taiwan might not see Taiwanese as their “compatriots” and instead viewed Taiwanese as Japanised people. This is a very interesting point, which may explain the February 28 Incident and the White Terror that followed.

The selection of the films

Apparently, Hou Hsiao-hsien films are not just limited to the Taiwanese trilogy and *Three Times*. In the last decade, Hous went on to make some cross-national film productions such as *Café Lumière* (2003) in Japan and *Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge* (2008) in France as well as some short films such as *The Electric Princess House* (2007) for the 60th Cannes Film Festival and *La Belle Epoque* (2011) for the 48th Golden Horse Film Festival. Nevertheless, the focus of this thesis is on Taiwanese historical films particularly in the eras of political change, namely 1895, 1947 and 2000 because I could make a comparison between my personal history and Hou’s particular films, namely *A City of Sadness, The Puppetmaster, Good Men, Good Women* and *Three Times*.

In her article “Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien,” June Yip (2008) points out that:
Hou Hsiao-hsien’s trilogy, *A City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, and *Good Men, Good Women*, uses the individual micro-history to reveal the concealed wound of the official macro-history. Furthermore, they emphasise that every representation of official history makes distorted presentation through the prism of a discussion. The national identity based on this kind of history can only be the official one (pp. 16–17).9

Yip’s account explains that Hou’s use of the micro-history to describe the macro-history is reasonable and worth further discussion. Taking Yip’s account further, it is necessary to distinguish between micro-history and macro-history in this thesis as Hou’s national trilogy is challenging Taiwanese people’s idea of viewing macro-history (the official history) through the use of ordinary people’s suffering and tragic fate in Japanese colonisation, February 28 Incident and White Terror. I would also explore the female version of the national trilogy, *Three Times*, not only over the controversy but also about Hou’s change in film style and the narration of history.

**Micro-history vs. macro-history**

Taiwan has very abundant history, which is ignored and condensed to merely Chinese history by KMT. This situation is described clearly by June Yip (1997):

Since its [Kuomindang’s] retreat from the Chinese mainland and assumption of control of Taiwan after World War II, therefore, the ruling Kuomindang government has skilfully deployed the rhetoric of nation to integrate Taiwan into a larger “Chinese” cultural identity and to weave a seamless narrative of Chinese nationhood that ignores differences that could in any way separate the island from the Mainland… Hence the institutionalised remembrance and careful preservation of a coherent “Chinese” tradition by the Kuomindang government was coupled with an “organised forgetting”10 that included the systematic suppression of the island’s aboriginal past, of local history, and of Taiwan’s complex heritage of non-Chinese colonisation, particularly its development under the Dutch (1624–1662) and the Japanese (1895–1945). In short, any historical experience that would mark Taiwan’s differences from China has long been downplayed or omitted altogether from the official culture of the island. (p. 139)

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9 My translation.
10 See Johnson (1994, pp. 206–210). Johnson emphasises in particular, the government’s official edicts to destroy all traces of the island’s Japanese past.
The above quote shows the complexity of Taiwan’s history which is assimilated to Chinese history by KMT after WWII. Hou’s intention is to detail lives of some individuals which emphasise on their personal experience living in Taiwan to provide different angles to see macro-history meaning official history enforced by KMT in media, textbooks and politics. Hou also gives the audience a reason for the occurrence of February 28 Incident and White Terror as it is at least partially caused by the cultural misunderstanding and barriers between local Taiwanese and Taiwanese Mainlanders. Hou is aware of the differences and gaps between the micro-history and macro-history; he is then carefully seaming the micro-history and macro-history to make his audience have a better and more complete understanding of Taiwan’s history.

**The representation of women**

One of the most contentious debates in the existing literature relates to the representation of women in Hou’s work. In 2005, Michael Berry (2005) conducted an interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien and his scriptwriter, Chu Tian-wen, that revealed Hou’s deep interest in women’s inner worlds. Hou spoke of his observations of his mother and grandmother and the way in which they seemed to bear a great burdens without expressing how they felt about it. However, Berry’s interview revealed Hou’s lack of understanding of the female experience – a potential problem if he uses women as a vehicle for telling his stories – one which may lead us to ask whether his women under the lens have real voices, or if they are mere puppets in the master’s hand. Mizou (1991) argues that even though women are used to tell history in Hou’s films, women cannot enter history through such a medium. Conversely, Emilie Yeh (2000) uses sound and image in A City of Sadness to illustrate how the opposite may in fact be the case. At the very least, these opposing arguments demonstrate that women are attempting to “enter” history, just as the micro-history attempts to counter the macro-history. It seems in the symbolic order, the official history (the development of which
is linear) and family/women history (the development of which is circular) will never be reconciled. However, women cannot be excluded from history, because micro-history and macro-history can co-exist, as Ray Huang has conceptualised (see Chapter Two). While I draw on Yeh’s position that women strive to enter macro-history from their traditional relegation to micro-history, I argue that micro-history and macro-history co-exist, and run parallel in Hou’s works, as demonstrated by the importance attributed to women’s memory in his films.

**Photographic truth and its relationship with public memory**

Memory is a fundamental element in the literature on Hou. For example, Wu Jia-qi focuses on the relationship between technology and memory and Tessa Morris-Suzuki explores the relationship between media and popular memory, yet their approaches differ significantly. In her article, “The Stripped Shadow—Talk about History and Memory in Good Men, Good Women,” for example, Wu Jia-qi (2002, pp. 303–305) writes that the film repeatedly points to the complicated dialectical relationship between technology and memory. She argues that this indicates that memory is not only the representation of past experiences or an objective understanding of “truth” toward the past, but also the product created by technology. For example, the fax machine brought up the contents of the lost diary, which means it can duplicate the key documents and extend the preservation letters. Yasujiro Ozu’s film shown on TV also brought up the memory in the 1940s not only of Japan but also of Taiwan, Japanese colonisation came to an end. Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2005, p. 75), on the other hand, is similarly concerned with photography (film literature and popular culture) and the ways in which it can represent popular memory. Comparing Wu and Morris-Suzuki’s theories, I question the usefulness of discussing Hou’s use of women in cinema and the use of a “film within a film” to represent history and, more importantly, whether this is a valid approach. For example, Good Men, Good Women was divided into three parts. Part one in
black and white is about the national heroine, Jiang Bi-yu’s life as a quasi-documentary. Part two in colour is about Liang Jing’s job as an actress to do the rehearsal of the film. Part three also in colour is about Liang Jing’s ordinary life in the past and present. Interestingly, Hou is playing with the colours on screen from black and white to colour to show the audience that the public memory might not be the truth but it is only a drama.

When it comes to photographic truth and its relationship with history/public memory, Jean Ma has similar comments to Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s. In ‘Chapter 1: Time without Measure, Sadness without Cure’ in Melancholy Drift (2005), Ma talks about the death of the third son, Wen-qing in the Lin family. She presents us with a photographic portrait of Wen-qing with his wife and a young child formally posed in the lounge of his own home. The photo was taken before he was re-arrested and executed by the Nationalists for photographing the February 28 Incident. The continuing life of the photo is a form of resistance to his death. Ma (2005) believes that “the film [A City of Sadness] resists the redemption of individual death within a national story, instead signalling the possibility that death and loss can overrun the narrative container of history and disrupt, rather than ratify, the order of the present” (p. 70). Ma further explains that,

The freeze-frame in A City of Sadness, however, establishes a different kind of boundary between the psychic and the social. And concomitantly gestures at alternative conceptions of social identity and community. The intersection of cinema and photography contained within the device at once disarticulates the opposition between still and moving, past and present, and highlights the power of technological media to denature memory itself and to disorganise its relationship of history (p. 70).

Ma details the interweaving relationship among photography, cinema, memory, and history, echoing Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s theory on the relationship between media and history.

**Humanism and naturalism**

Critics are also divided regarding the issue of humanism and naturalism in Hou’s works. Some have argued that Hou hides behind these labels to disguise his political ideology.
In his book, *Death of the New Cinema*, Mizou (1991) suggests that Hou is irresponsible as an historical filmmaker because he claims to be a humanist, not an historian. In this way, Mizou argues, Hou avoids criticism by claiming that *A City of Sadness* is about human beings under nature. Conversely, Shen Xiao-yin (2000, pp. 79–80) argues that Hou’s attitude toward history is not one of avoidance but rather of confrontation. A balanced appraisal of these views suggests that while we cannot ignore Hou’s concern for human beings, particularly those existing on the margins, this does not mean that he is incapable of using history to project an international voice. As Hou stated in an interview with Michael Berry in 2005, “Chinese life experience has always been very political” (Berry, 2005, p. 249). He also claimed that he was non-political and “just” an artist. Indeed, in an interview with Yang Zhong-wei in 2010, Hou noted that his scriptwriter, Chu Tian-wen, viewed him not as a storyteller but as a lyric poet. However, Hou has also engaged in political activities. In 2004, for example, he became the president of the Taiwan Democratic School established by the previous Chairman in the Democratic Progress Party (DPP), Xu Xin-liang. Xu had been disappointed with President Chen Shui-bian and left the DPP to become a KMT supporter. This raises the question: if Hou were simply a poet/artist, as he claims, why did he want to be associated with the “Taiwan Democratic School” and the previous DPP Chairman (Xu Xin-liang), who later became a supporter of the KMT? Does Hou further his political agenda through his films and then use his fame as a filmmaker to advance his political standing?

**Are Hou’s films used to flesh out their political dimensions?**

This debate is problematised by the notion of diversity in Hou’s films, which is used to flesh out their political dimensions. Chris Berry (1994, p. 56) noted, for example, how the diversity of languages in the films offers a new concept of the motherland existing in a hybrid space. Extrapolating from this, we can see how the mono-cultural hegemony of either the old Japanese government or the KMT government might not be effective in Taiwan, as revealed
very clearly in Hou’s films: conflicts and misunderstanding between Taiwanese people are ongoing in this diverse culture. Alternatively, Nick Browne (2000, pp. 228–229) holds that Hou’s films are family stories and that politics should not be involved. Yet Li Zhen-ya (2000, p. 135) contends that Hou’s films should not be depoliticised and, indeed, never can be. Following Li’s approach, I would argue that Hou’s historical films cannot be read as merely family stories, as they also address broader political questions.

**Motivations behind Hou’s works: Taiwanese in need of surviving**

The debate on the motivations behind Hou’s works has also centred on the particularities of Taiwanese culture. For example, June Yip (2000, p. 283) has applied the Taiwanese survival instinct as a lens for interpreting Hou’s films, arguing, “From the private perspective, the political history appears merely as a series of hurdles for everyone to overcome, pragmatic adjustments to be made in order to survive.” We see this, too, in Emilie Yeh’s statement that Hou’s intention is to depict and preserve the “quotidian space” of Taiwan (2001, p. 71). In his book *No Man an Island*, James Udden (2009) talks about the ups and downs of Hou’s career over the last three decades. He concludes that,

Hou, as unpredictable as he has become, still deserves a place in film history as one of the world’s great cinematic masters, largely because he had the good fortune of living in Taiwan at a particular time in history, and because he has created a new cinematic tradition in Asia which now has several practitioners throughout the region (pp. 10–11).

Udden further writes,

In the case of Hou, some seem puzzled that he is from Taiwan, but this study aims to solve that particular puzzle, to explore thoroughly how the tortuous path of Hou’s career only seems strange until one looks carefully at Taiwan itself over the last three decades, most of all the convoluted, interlocking path taken by both Taiwanese cinema and Taiwanese society as a whole (p. 11).

Udden explains that Hou’s films reflect Taiwan’s particular historical and geographical situation, which are merged in the films. Udden also reminds us that,

Taiwan Experience is different and unique, but not an incomprehensible, collective “Other.” After all, we all share something which the films of Hou remind us of—we are
all partakers of experience at this very moment, those moments of everyday life which will never enter into the annals of “History” proper…maybe what is most important is not when one lives, or why one loves, but that one simply lives (p. 185).

According to Udden, the depiction of ordinary people under Hou’s lens is merely about how they survive under the conditions of a certain period of time in history. I propose to take these notions a step further by suggesting that the Taiwanese need for survival is represented so clearly in Hou’s films because he, too, was struggling to survive. For example, in 1988, prior to *A City of Sadness*, Hou helped the Ministry of Defence in the KMT to shoot a MTV commercial called *All for Tomorrow [Yiqie wei Mingtian]*. This is interesting because *A City of Sadness* does not reveal whether it is a pro-KMT or anti-KMT film, yet his prior involvement with the KMT makes Hou more intriguing than any other filmmaker in Taiwan.

In terms of his biography, the director too had to carve out his own niche; initially he was barely able to make ends meet, when one day a door was opened for him in his career and he was required to compromise some principles. Perhaps he too would become like the puppet master, Li Tian-lu, who struggles to find a way to survive no matter what government he lived under.

Udden is not the only scholar who details Hou’s films from the past to current times. Emilie Yeh and Darrell Davis’ *Taiwan Film Directors* (2005) divides Hou’s career into three parts, describing how Hou switched from being box office sweetheart to box office poison, and then made his career climb up again. They explain how the change of Hou’s films is related to marketing strategy and political concerns which will be further discussed in Chapter One.

In his book *Hitchcock with a Chinese Face*, Jerome Silbergeld (2004) describes the plots and images in *Good Men, Good Women* and also the relationship between ancient Chinese paintings and the use of them in Hou’s films shots (pp. 84–112). Even though my thesis details the influence of Chinese aesthetics on Hou, the scene by scene analysis is not
my main focus. In Chapter Three where I do discuss *Good Men, Good Women* my focus is on the interweaving relationship between popular memory and media.

**Hou’s film style and technique**

In order to understand Hou’s film style, we cannot ignore his early works in the 1980s. In his article ‘Taiwan Popular Cinema and the Strange Apprenticeship of Hou Hsiao-hsien’ (2003), James Udden claims that “the style of [Hou’s] commercial trilogy…is not entirely distinguishable from other films of this time” (p. 136). Guo-Juin Hong disagrees. Focusing on the final shot of *Cute Girl* (1980), Hong (2011) argues that the use of the rural landscape in the disappearance of the lovely couple under the tree makes Hou’s style unique (p. 90). Even though I also disagree with Udden, I remain unconvinced by Hong’s argument. I think what makes Hou’s initial work different is his insertion into the plot of small acts of everyday reality such as the repeated toilet scenes in *Cute Girl*. This is also apparent in his inclusion of marginalised people, such as the family faced with the government plans to demolish their home in *Cute Girl* (1980), a blind medical student who recovered from surgery in the end in *Cheerful Wind* (1981), and the unemployed old veteran in *Green, Green Grass of Home* (1983). Hou Hsiao-hsien’s film technique has also been much discussed. In *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts* (2007), James Udden comments on the movement of Hou’s camera in *Good Men, Good Women*, observing that in this film Hou does not use long takes and static camera as much as he did before (p. 191). Udden concludes that just as the situation in Taiwan is changing, so is Hou’s approach to film making.

**The aesthetics of Hou’s films**

Finally, critical discussion has touched broadly on the aesthetics of Hou’s films, in particular his originality. Many compare Hou’s work to Yasujiro Ozu’s films. Nornes and Yeh (1994), for instance, noted the difference between Hou and Ozu’s transitional shots, claiming Hou’s oeuvre is more original. Gary Needham (2006) attributes the similarities
between Ozu and Hou’s films to the impact of Japanese colonisation in Taiwan. Building on Nornes and Yeh’s and Needham’s theories, I would argue that in Taiwan the influence of contemporary Japanese culture is as important, in terms of the uniqueness of Hou’s work, as that of the Chinese. In Peggy Jiao’s (2001, p. 5) article, Hou suggested implicitly that the indirectness of Chinese culture had influenced him in an interview with her in 1993. Stephanie Donald (2000, p. 41) observed that family life is part and parcel of Chinese cinema and she specifically used “public space” to read Chinese cinema. Separately, Catherine Yi-yu Cho Woo (1989) provided a technical discussion, stating that Chinese montage is the best description of the intention behind Hou’s scenic shots. A balanced appraisal of this theme suggests that Hou’s films have been influenced by Chinese culture as well as Chinese aesthetics, as examined in Chapter Four of this thesis. Because A City of Sadness is complicated it is not only about the historical background but also about the Lin family’s story. Bérénice Reynaud’s A City of Sadness (2002) provides a very good introductory book about the film itself. It details Hou and traditional Chinese aesthetics and its relationship between Japanese art and western art, and Yasujiro Ozu’s influence on Hou, which I found useful for further analysis in Chapter One. Reynaud believes that “the goal of a Chinese painting is not to represent reality as it appears to the naked eye, but to manifest the true essence of things” (p. 80). This best explains why Hou exploits the Chinese aesthetic in his films, making them poetic in not only images but also in narrations (Reynaud, 2002, pp. 78–83). David Bordwell (2005), in ‘Chapter Five: Hou or Constraints’ in Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging, has devoted much space to analyse the images of Hou’s films in A City of Sadness (pp. 186–237). Alongside the images which he compares with Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, Zhang Yimou, and Edward Yang De-chang’s films, Bordwell also provides an account of Taiwan’s political history around 1945. What convinces me most is the similarity of Hou’s and Ozu’s use of low angle camera shooting. This might be a reflection of
a tatami mat interior aesthetic experience. Instead of focusing on the technical aspects of the similarity in their films, I would talk about the cultural connection between these two directors. Taking the discussion of the resemblance between Hou and Ozu further, through the idea of wu 無, a Buddhist concept translated as nothingness, which both directors use to express life and death. Ozu’s epitaph consists of only the one word 無. Similarly, to show Taiwanese culture and religion during this transitional period, in A City of Sadness, Hou uses Wen-qing to deliver a message to an innocent political victim’s brother. Wen-qing writes to him, 「生離祖國, 死歸祖國, 死生天命, 無想無念◦」 This is literally translated as: “Born out of the motherland, in death I will return to the motherland. Life and death is in Heaven’s hands. Do not worry about it.” Wen-qing makes a strong reference to his religion, Buddhism, as ‘死生天命, 無想無念,’ ‘Whatever happens, heaven will decide our fate, there is no need for grief or despair.’ Hou makes a subtle reference to religion and the audience is able to see one of the major religious influences at that time.

Poetic in the narration of history

Finally, with regard to both Hou’s film style and my own approach to analysing his works, Hou’s film style is poetic in the narration of history, weaving a story through narrative more than it argues a point or openly states a case with respect to Taiwan’s history. His perception of history and politics is not presented in a straightforward way. On the contrary, such perception is embodied in the details of life, which he claims stem from what could be called a humanitarian concern or a naturalist’s approach. The impact and attraction of this rhetorical mode is evident in the approach of my own work. I approach the central concern of

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each chapter obliquely, sometimes through the lens of personal history, in which the argument of the thesis is refracted through comparison and contrast, rather than through a more direct or outright rhetorical style. In this way I seek to set out an analysis of Hou’s films that illuminates the broader historical and cultural trajectories of Taiwan.

The macro point of view adopted in this thesis, with respect to the social, cultural and historical readings of Hou’s cinematic texts, is complemented by a micro approach to the connections between personal and public history. The thesis reveals the interwoven relationship between the director’s work and Taiwanese social phenomena, which has not been explored in such depth in previous studies on Hou. His life, thoughts and film aesthetics are paralleled with Taiwan’s development as a modern nation, and provide historians of cinema and of Taiwan in particular with a deeper context in which to better understand Taiwan.

If making films is a means for a director to search for the self, then Hou’s films can be read as not only an interpretation of his personal history and the historical path taken by Taiwan, but they are also a way of searching out where the roots of Taiwan lie, a question that has always generated much discussion and no concrete answers. Hou’s patient observation of past and current events in Taiwan brings the audience into contact with Taiwanese cultural phenomena and allows them to form a connection to the country as it is today. Just as he favours an open ending for his films, Hou’s works do not provide the viewer with simple answers to questions about Taiwanese identity. Rather, they provoke doubts, questions, queries and explorations, which allow the viewer to participate in this same search for a better understanding of the people of Taiwan.
Chapter One:

Introducing Taiwan’s Macro/Micro-History and Hou Hsiao-hsien

I made this film, *A City of Sadness*, not for the sake of opening up old wounds, but because it is vital that we face up to this incident if we are to understand where we come from and who we are as Taiwanese (Hou, as cited in Dissanayake, 1994, xxvi).

Blindfolding us, you expect us to see no more
Plugging our ears, you want us to hear no more
Yet, the truth is in our heart
The pain is in the chest
How much longer do we have to endure?
How much longer do we have to be kept silent?
If tears can wash away all dust
If blood can be exchanged for freedom
Let tomorrow remember today’s outcry
Let the whole world see the wound of history (Lin et al., 1989)!

In this chapter, I begin with a list of micro-history (my family story) and macro-history (official history) in Taiwan and present the interrelationship between them, which is followed by the introduction of Hou Hsiao-hsien.

**Macro-History**

- On March 19, 2004, just one day before the presidential election in Taiwan, the former President of the Republic of China\(^\text{12}\) (from 2000 to 2004), Chen Shui-bian, was shot in the stomach. The reason for this remains a mystery, as the suspected

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\(^{12}\) In this thesis, Taiwan and the Republic of China are used interchangeably.
criminal, Chen Yi-xiong, committed suicide and his body was found, ten days after the incident, in the Anping fishing port in Tainan. The following day, people began to vote for Chen out of sympathy for what had happened to him and, as a result, he defeated his political rival Lian Zhan by little more than 30,000 votes. Chen, the leader of the Democratic Progress Party, continued as the President of Taiwan from 2004 to 2008.

- On November 11, 2010, the former Taiwanese President, Chen Shui-bian, and his wife, Wu Shu-zhen, were both sentenced to imprisonment for seventeen and a half years individually for corrupt dealings with Taiwanese entrepreneurs, during his presidency from 2000 to 2008. Chen’s wife, due to ill health, was exempted from serving prison time.

- On November 27, 2010, one day before the mayoral election for Taiwan’s five cities (Taipei, New Taipei, Taichung, Tainan, and Kaohsiung), the son of the former vice president Lian Zhan, Lian Sheng-wen, was shot in the face while helping his friend with an election campaign event. A member of the audience was also struck. The following day, the leading political party, KMT, won three seats out of the five cities. Some felt that the victory of KMT in the election was due to the bullet rather than to people’s satisfaction with the leading party. The killer, who was caught on the spot, is still under investigation.

- On December 9, 2010, the honourable Chairman of the KMT in Taiwan, Lian Zhan, was awarded the Confucius Peace Award by a private Chinese organisation, one day before the Nobel Peace Award Ceremony in Norway. The reason Lian received this award was his contribution to building a closer relationship between Taiwan and China.
On March 11, 2011, Japan was struck by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake, followed by a devastating tsunami. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of the Interior, on 24 March 2011, the amount of donations from the Taiwanese government and people totalled NT$ 21,051,40000, or in excess of AUD 70 million. Taiwan was generous in supporting Japan after the disaster. One Taiwanese blogger, Bu Xiao-shen (pseudonym) (2011), claimed, “If Japan collapses because of the earthquake, it would also bring down Taiwanese’s Eden Garden in their hearts.” In his article, he discussed what was wrong with the President of the Republic of China, Ma Yin-jiu, visiting a hot spring while Japan suffered the effects of the earthquake. Why did Ma have to be criticised by the Democratic Progress Party? One of the lower house members in the DPP, Xue Ling, suggested that Taiwan should lower the national flag for Japan’s devastation because when the US experienced September 11, Taiwan lowered the national flag to express its condolences for the tragedy. Taiwan’s premier, Wu Dun-yi, responded by saying that it would be very strange if only Taiwan lowered the national flag but not other countries. Meanwhile, some Japanese bloggers responded to the substantial Taiwanese donation: “We will eat more Taiwanese bananas to return the favour” (Bu Ka, 2011). Later, some Taiwanese bloggers on the most popular bulletin board system of National Taiwan University (PTT) asked if Japanese only knew Taiwan as a land that produces bananas. Some Taiwanese were surprised at how ignorant the Japanese are about Taiwan, while the people of Taiwan know much about Japanese sub-culture and fashion.

On June 6, 2011, the American Institute in Taiwan revealed that Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the national father of the Republic of China, took the vow of US citizenship in Honolulu in Hawaii for the convenience of his revolution in 1904. The timing of releasing the document is very interesting, as Taiwan is due to celebrate the centennial
establishment of the Republic of China on October 10, 2011.

- On June 30, 2011, the former President of the Republic of China, Li Deng-hui was charged with corruption during his presidency from 1988 to 2000. Because Li is 90 years old and he has made large contributions to Taiwan in his political life, the judge will review his sentence. Notably, Li was charged with corruption by the former President Chen Shui-bian when Chen was the President. This investigation was eventually closed after many years. The Chairman of the Taiwan Independence Party, Huang Kun-hui, believes that this is the strategy of the current President, Ma Yin-jiu because the slogan from Li Deng-hui, “Give up Ma and keep Taiwan” has gained traction and Ma wants to control and use the judiciary to fight and deal with political issues in order to win the next presidential election in 2012 (Yeh, 2011).

Thus is the ongoing political drama of Taiwan, which usually occurs around election time. Politicians, by any means, seek a majority of votes using any strategy, no matter how extreme. The people are becoming concerned that political parties have no constructive policies or strong election campaigns, and that a mere “accidental” gunshot could be more effective than anything else. The events chronicled above represent the macro-history of Taiwan. By way of contrast, the following is my family history.

**Micro-History**

- In the traditional Chinese house of my paternal grandfather, the centre of the house is the hall in which we worship our ancestors. The gate of the hall says 嘉祥 (Dunhuang), which is the name of the old city of China’s Gansu Province (甘肅省). When my paternal great grandfather built this house, he traced the origins of our family name, Hung (洪). Hundreds of years ago, our ancestors moved from Gansu in
the north to Fujian Province (福建省) in the south, and later the Hung family relocated to Taiwan, where it remains. A photographic exhibition called “Taiwan under Japanese Colonisation” (June–July 2010), held in our home town, Xinhua (新化), featured my great grandfather’s family photos.

- My paternal grandfather (born 1926) lived in a traditional Chinese house. Inside was a Japanese-style bedroom, with tatami mats on the bed base. Every morning, he liked to sing Japanese karaoke, including military songs, while drinking Taiwanese tea. He always warned us, “Do not talk about politics in public, otherwise you will get into trouble.”
- My father (born 1953) shed tears when he saw, on television on January 25, 2005, the first direct flight from Taiwan to China in 55 years. Such flights had been suspended due to political differences between the mainland and Taiwan.
- I was born in 1980. I am interested in foreign cultures and obtained a Bachelor’s Degree in Foreign Languages and Literature in Taiwan. I came to Australia to pursue theatre studies and later developed a passion for Taiwanese cinema. In 2003, I began my research on Taiwanese cinema.

The macro-history and micro-history above seem to be unrelated. They are, however, inseparable, and they interweave and interconnect. For example, an election is very important in Taiwan because of its close relationship to the economic, social and cultural fate of the Taiwanese. The DDP is driven by an ideology of Taiwanese independence, whereas the Nationalist Party (once the rival of the Chinese Communist Party) is more sympathetic and closer to China in its economic policies.
My paternal great grandfather was born in the initial stages of Japanese colonisation in Taiwan. His idea that “China is our motherland” is deep-seated. It is for this reason that the old Chinese city’s name, Dunhuang (敦煌), is on the gate of our ancestors’ hall.

My paternal grandfather was born during the Kominka movement in Taiwan. He once said that, before he turned twenty, he was Japanese. He was recruited to serve in the Japanese army on the day Japan surrendered. His emotional landscape, his nostalgia for the Japanese regime and the complicated sensations he felt as it collapsed, were unchanged.

As my father grew up, Taiwan was fully controlled by the KMT. It was not until 1996 that Taiwan had its first president, followed by the second president who was the leader of the DDP (which since 1980 had been the largest opposition party).

Due to political changes taking place in Taiwan, I grew up in an era that straddled the extreme ideologies of “China is our motherland” and “Taiwan must be independent.”

Similarly, Taiwan’s history has produced a film director, Hou Hsiao-hsien, whose works have focused on the historical evolution of Taiwan through interpretations of ordinary people’s stories. After viewing his films, the audience perceives not only the micro-history of the individual stories, but also the macro-history of Taiwan. However, Hou is as controversial as he is famous. Yet, even though Hou’s works have drawn criticism, he remains one of the most influential film directors in Taiwan, as his films are highly relevant to Taiwan both culturally and historically.

**Why Hou for my thesis?**

Gary Needham (2006) has described Hou’s films as a hybrid of Chinese aesthetics and post-colonial Japanese culture. Hou is famous for his long-take and elliptical/poetic style.

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13. The Kominka movement was a Japanese war strategy (between 1937 and 1945) designed to seek Taiwanese help in the war with China. In order to achieve this goal, Taiwanese needed to be Japanised, such as learning Japanese and respecting the Japanese Emperor. They were recruited as navy personnel for the sake of honour.
to tell stories not only about people but also about history. Unlike another Taiwan-born internationally famous director, Ang Lee, Hou focuses primarily on the social and cultural phenomena that are not easily understood by people outside of Taiwan. Unlike yet another Taiwanese director, Yang De-chang, who always focuses on the realism of the urban environment of Taipei, Hou prefers to tell realist stories in the less industrialised south of Taiwan, where he was born. Hou also differs from the Hong Kong director, Wong Kar-wai, who focuses on the nostalgia of Hong Kong prior to 1997, when China resumed control of the state; by contrast, in that the haunting concept in *Good Men, Good Women* is traumatic. And unlike Zhang Yimou, who peddles Orientalism (the ugliness of China that Westerners prefer/imagine) to the West to gain a voice internationally, Hou has chosen instead to sell the “skeleton in Taiwan’s closet,” February 28, which is rarely discussed by Taiwanese people and not generally known to foreigners, at the Venice Film Festival in order to advance his film career. The timing of the overseas promotion of *A City of Sadness* is controversial, as it is just right after the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, which has left a very negative impression on people in the world. It is true that in Hou’s historical films we never see the exact “incident or war” on the screen. *A City of Sadness* was advertised as a story about the February 28 Incident or “the Taiwan massacre” at the 46th Venice Film Festival in 1989. It implies that Hou is an opportunist who makes *A City of Sadness* happen in such a political sensitive timing. While the international success of the debut of *A City of Sadness* gave Hou Hsiao-hsien fame, it also drew criticism from his compatriots. Most of the criticism came from Mizou (1991) in *Death of the New Cinema*, which I shall discuss later in this chapter. The main debate about Hou is whether or not his films are intentionally political. I would like to add to this debate. Further, I will examine the ongoing criticism of Hou in 2004 (just before the screening of *Three Times*), and a clearer understanding of Hou’s real intentions in producing history-related films. In this thesis, I will provide a reading of four of Hou’s films,
which depict crucial political turning points in Taiwan (Japanese colonisation, the KMT’s takeover, and then the DDP’s political control until 2008). As a basis for understanding Hou’s films, this chapter introduces Hou’s background and his specialty, outlines his life and career in the historical context of post-World War II (WWII) Taiwan, including the February 28 (or 228) Incident, and describes how he is perceived by his fellow Taiwanese. However, first I will give a brief account of the February 28 Incident, which forms the political background of Hou’s films.

**The February 28 Incident**

Following Japan’s surrender to the Allies in August 1945, Taiwan was returned to China’s control. The Taiwanese welcomed the return because they share ancestry and cultural heritage with China. However, misunderstanding and irreconcilable differences between the Taiwanese and the corrupt Nationalist government culminated in the February 28 Incident of 1947. This topic was censured in Taiwan’s media from 1947 to 1987, and in that sense these decades represent time “lost” to history.

**The origins of the February 28 Incident.** According to Dai Guo-hui and Yeh Yun-yun (1992),

On the evening of February 27, 1947, six investigators were sent from the Taipei Branch of Alcohol and Tobacco State Monopoly to see if anyone was selling

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14 The Japanese colonial government adopted a policy of state monopoly in Taiwan from 1897 to 1945. Profits from its various monopolies no doubt ameliorated its financial circumstances during its early rule of the island. In fact, the state monopoly became a major source of revenue for the Governor-General of Taiwan in the ensuing years. The policy of the state monopoly evidently played a significant role in the Japanese rule of Taiwan. Upon the takeover of Taiwan by the Nationalist government in 1945, the Office of Taiwan Administrators was established. It continued the same Japanese policy of the state monopoly out of financial considerations. Its implementation, however, incurred Taiwanese suspicion for Taiwan was no longer a Japanese colony. As a matter of fact, the populace resented it. They had reservations about the integration of economy of Taiwan into Mainland China after the island’s disconnection with Japan. On the other hand, different measures were taken in the mainland and, in Taiwan, the drawbacks in economic planning, the lack of coordination of ministries in the central government, and the imbalance of supply and demand all intensified people’s resentment. The highhanded measure against the sale of privately made cigarettes finally triggered the insurrection on and after February 28, 1947. In the aftermath, the Office of the Taiwan Administrator was reshuffled and renamed as the Provincial Government of Taiwan and its Bureau of State Monopolies was reorganised as Taiwan’s Provincial Monopoly Bureau of Tobaccos and Wine in response to criticisms. The implementation of the state monopoly not only contributed to revenue but also exerted a significant impact on politics and society in post-war Taiwan as well. See Huang (2009).
untaxed cigarettes near Taipei Tai-Ping Tong (now Yan-Ping North Road). The investigators found a middle-aged widow, Lin Jiang-mai, with her two children, selling untaxed cigarettes in front of the Tian-ma Tea House. When investigators wanted to confiscate the vendor’s cigarettes and a small amount of cash, she begged them not to take it all. An investigator then hit Mrs. Lin’s head with his gun. As a result, Mrs. Lin’s head began bleeding and she fainted. In the meantime, the crowds around her were becoming so agitated that arguments broke out between the bystanders and the investigators. Facing a mounting protest, the investigators fled and fired random shots. One citizen, Cheng Wen-xi, was shot and died the next day. The crowds became so angry that they surrounded the police station and military headquarters, demanding the death sentence for the man responsible.

On the morning of February 28, a crowd estimated at about 2,000 marched past the American Consulate and held a protest in front of the Alcohol and Tobacco State Monopoly (ATSM). The protesters then rushed into the ATSM’s headquarters in Taipei and threw out quantities of documents and containers, which they subsequently set fire to in the middle of the road. ATSM’s mainland employees were beaten mercilessly. In the afternoon, crowds gathered in front of the Government Administration Building and demanded justice, which, they believed, should entail a death sentence for the man responsible and the resignation of the ATSM Director. To the shock of the crowds, the soldiers on the balcony of the building mounted a machine gun and fired at the crowd, killing at least four people. At that point, the tragedy escalated. The entire Taipei City fell into chaos, shops and factories closed, students went on strike, and the head of the police declared martial law in Taiwan. As a result, young people took over a radio transmitter (which is now in the February 28 Memorial Museum), to expose the Incident to the islanders, and urged all the people of Taiwan to support the anti-government movement (pp. 191–205).15

The US Department of State (1967) observed,

After March 1, the tension spread across the island, which by then was in a state of chaos. The crowds clashed with the police and the mainlanders. Chen Yi, the Chief Executive and Garrison Commander of Taiwan (台灣警備總司令), then declared martial law all over Taiwan. Armed military patrols began to appear in the city, firing at random wherever they went. The number of dead on both sides increased (p. 927).

According to Li Xiao-feng (1998),

On March 1, the Chairman of the Taipei Municipal People’s Political Council met the Council of National and Provincial People’s Political Councils and the Taiwan representatives to the National Assembly, to form a committee to settle the February 28 Incident. At 5pm that day General Chen Yi pleaded with citizens on the radio, assuring them that:

1. Martial law would be lifted.
2. Those arrested during the rioting would be released.
3. The police would cease firing.

15 My translation.
4. A joint committee of officials and citizens would be established to settle the grievances resulting from the February 28 Incident.

On March 2, the Settlement Committee for the February 28 Incident, established by Taipei Municipal People’s Political Council, held a meeting in Chungshan Hall, and the government assigned five officers to participate in it. Publicly General Chen Yi accepted all the demands, declaring that, “if people have any suggestions, they should tell the Committee, which will accept them and improve its conduct.” At the same time, however, General Chen Yi asked the Nanjing government to send reinforcements to Taiwan (pp. 22–25).

During the turbulent period between 1947 and 1948, martial law was lifted and re-imposed several times. Dai Guo-hui and Yeh Yun-yun (1992, pp. 233–294) noted, “Extended from Keelung to the rest of Taiwan, martial law was lifted on March 2 and re-imposed on March 9 1947. It was lifted again on March 14 1947 and re-imposed on May 20 1949. It remained in force until 1987.”

**The outcome of the February 28 Incident.** The total number of people killed in the February 28 Incident cannot be accurately estimated. However, the most commonly accepted number is around ten to twenty thousand. The February 28 Incident not only represented the tragedy of broken Taiwanese families, it also had a significant influence on Taiwanese politics and society. The Taiwanese, having endured colonial rule for many decades, became more submissive and servile to the new rulers in order to survive. Moreover, as a result of the Incident, the Taiwanese people were disappointed, discouraged, and became indifferent to politics. The Incident was responsible for the entrenched differences between the Taiwanese and Mainlanders, which even today are difficult to resolve.

The incident had the long-term consequence of polarising Taiwan’s populations of Mainlanders and Taiwanese Hokkienese. It exposed what lay behind the inevitable election-time discussions of the segregation between “Taiwanese Mainlanders” and “Taiwanese.” For me, knowledge of the incident helps me to understand my grandparents’ nostalgia for the
period of Japanese colonisation and their reluctance to discuss politics, and why my family did not want to talk too much about the 228 Incident, as it was too bitter an experience to share with those who had no knowledge of it. As such, Hou Hsiao-hsien is brave to reveal this skeleton in the closet in his film *A City of Sadness*. In the following section I give an account of Hou’s background in order to better understand his intentions in making this film.

**A brief biography of Hou Hsiao-hsien**

Hou was born into a Hakka family in China’s Mei County (梅縣), Guangdong Province, in 1947. His father moved to Taiwan after WWII to seek better employment in a school, bringing the whole family with him in 1949. Hou grew up in the countryside – Fengshan (鳳山) in Kaohsiung, in the south of Taiwan – and had a few childhood *jiaotou*, local rascals, as friends, until he commenced military service (Berry, 2005, pp. 256–257). His childhood experience with rascals has been the subject of later films, such as *A Time to Live, and A Time to Die* (1985), *A City of Sadness*, *Good Men, Good Women*, and *Good Bye South, Good Bye* (1996).

Hou recalled in an interview with Olivier Assayas, in *The Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1997), that he was despised by his siblings and thought he was hopeless when he failed the university entrance exam and he even sold his dead father’s watch at a pawnshop to support his gambling habit. It was not until he was serving in the military that he realised he had always been interested in the humanities and decided to attend National Taiwan Junior College of Arts for film studies. He noted that Taiwanese people learned about Taiwan’s condensed history, and that was why he attempted to make people talk about Taiwan’s history. He explained at the end of the interview that he thought Taiwanese society was quite primitive, meaning that people focused on masculinity. He noted that while politics is interesting, it is too calculating for his tastes. In comparison, he observed, gangster life is
more romantic. He regretted that he was not the head of a gangster group when he was young. Instead, he is now at the top of the film field in Taiwan. Does he want to achieve more than that, wanting to be politically involved? That is the question.

**Hou’s political objectivity and his Hakka background.** Due to his personal background, Hou Hsiao-hsien is by far the most observant and objective feature filmmaker in terms of retelling Taiwan’s history. As a second-generation Chinese Hakka immigrant in Taiwan, he is not as “local” as the aboriginal or Hokkien Taiwanese. His father brought the whole family to Taiwan seeking to further his teaching career, but he only considered staying in Taiwan for a short time. As such, Hou’s father saw no point in buying good furniture; one day they would return to China, and Taiwan was only a temporary stop. As Hou’s grandmother constantly searched for a road leading back to China, her death signified that the hope of “returning to China” was gone. Due to the Chinese civil war on the Mainland, Hou’s family were unable to return to China. Nevertheless, as a Chinese Hakka in Taiwan, Hou did not forget his “mother tongue,” as demonstrated in his films. Nornes and Yeh (1994) note that Hou has deliberately introduced the main three languages of Taiwan – Mandarin, Hakka, and Hokkien – to illustrate the phenomenon of multilingualism in Taiwan:

The New Cinema directors have responded to a recent increase in the public consciousness of the movement to return to the native and regional cultures. They have used actors who speak Taiwanese Amoy dialect to portray real-life ordinary people. Hou Hsiao-hsien may be the filmmaker who has dealt most carefully with the trilingual phenomenon (Mandarin, Taiwanese Amoy and Hakka) in Taiwan. His *Summer at Grandpa’s, A Time to Live, and A Time to Die*, and *A City of Sadness* present multiple dialects to oppose the government’s forced monolingualism.

Chris Berry also noted the use of multiple languages in *A City of Sadness*. Berry (1994, pp. 57–61) hints that Hou, through the use of Hokkien dialect in *A City of Sadness*, has tactically

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16 See *The Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (Assayas, 1997).
17 This idea is shown in *A Time to Live, and A Time to Die* (Hou, 1985).
asserted Taiwan’s national identity, which is different from that of Taiwan’s motherland, China. Hou’s use of multiple languages is especially interesting in his 1980s films, when Mandarin films were the mainstream and the Hokkien dialect was popular only among local people and not in the media. Hou’s inability to forget his origins means that he deals with national issues tactfully and with respect.

**Hou’s initial trilogy and the first realistic film, *His Son’s Big Doll in The Sandwich Man***

In order to better understand Hou’s cinematic texts following the imposition of martial law, I provide a brief introduction to Hou’s initial trilogy, which was a great success as a series of romantic comedies before the lifting of martial law. Then, I will provide an account of his first realistic film, *His Son’s Big Doll in The Sandwich Man*.

In the first film of the trilogy, *Cute Girl*, we can see that the female character, Wen-wen, refuses to accept the marriage arranged by her father and escapes to her beloved aunt’s place in the south. Then, she falls in love with an engineer who pretends to be poor but is actually from a wealthy family. When her holiday ends, it seems their romance too must cease; it is time for her to go back to reality. Later, Wen-wen’s blind date, Ma Qiang, confesses to her that he has a girlfriend in France and this blind date is purely for the benefit of his family. In the end, on another blind date set up by her aunt, Wen-wen meets the engineer again and realises that he is actually the son of an entrepreneur in Taiwan. This film shows that, even though Wen-wen is operating in a patriarchal society, she is courageous enough to live the life she wants.

The second film of the trilogy, *The Cheerful Wind*, is about a woman (Xing-hui) who is a director’s assistant and has an ambiguous relationship with the director. One day, while shooting a TV commercial, her eyes are caught by a young blind man. Later, Xing-hui and the blind man bump into each other on the street. Xing-hui cannot resist helping the blind man, who is a medical student, out of sympathy and curiosity. Later, Xing-hui has to go to the
south as a substitute art teacher in primary school. One scene is extremely interesting: Xing-hui is criticised by the school principal because she tells the students to repaint the wall, which was covered by school principles, as a sea world. The principal complains about what she could do if her supervisor visits the school. In the end, the colourful wall is approved by the school and the blind man’s sight is restored following surgery. Xing-hui is able to go to Europe with her ex-boyfriend and the man who was blind before will wait for her to come back. In this film, again, the female character still has the power to decide her own fate in difficult situations.

The third film, *Green, Green Grass of Home*, is about a romance between two primary school teachers. However, this time the issue of ex-soldier unemployment arises. An old soldier, in order to survive, uses electricity to illegally catch fish in the river. The lead character is not happy about this situation and makes propaganda with his students in school to stop this illegal activity. Among the three films in the trilogy, this one focuses more on reality, unlike the previous two melodramas.

Hou’s films became more realistic in *His Son’s Big Doll* in *The Sandwich Man*. In this film, we see the bitterness of an unemployed father and the difficulty of surviving for a poor family. In the end, the father gets a job as a film promoter, dressed as a clown on the street. Sadly, one day he goes home without his makeup to cheer his son up. His son starts crying because he thought his father was a clown and he could not recognise his father’s face without makeup. Ironically, the last line of the film is the father saying that, “I am my son’s biggest puppet.” From this film, we can see that the struggle of ordinary people in daily life and the realism of poverty is the main focus in the 1960s Taiwan, which not only differentiates it from his previous romantic films but also sets up Hou’s realistic style in his later films.

In addition, *The Sandwich Man* is an omnibus of three short films by three directors. 1)
Erzi de Da Wanou [His Son’s Big Doll] by Hou Hsiao-hsien 2) Xiao-qi de na Ding Maozi [Xiao-qi’s Hat] by Zeng Zhuang-xiang and 3) Qing Pingguo de Ziwei [The Taste of Green Apple] by Wan Ren. Even though the film passed film censorship by the Government Information Office, it did encounter difficulties. Some conservative Taiwanese film reviewers feared that the poverty theme and the illegal buildings in The Taste of Green Apple ruined the international image of Taiwan and wrote a letter to the cultural division in the KMT party. As a result, the Central Motion Pictures Company, which is operated by the KMT, cut out some parts of the film without Wan Ren’s permission. So Wan Ren asked a United Times journalist, Tang Shi-qi, to write an article about the affair, resulting in the bureaucratic intervention of KMT being strongly criticised. Finally, The Sandwich Man was presented on screen without any deletions.  

This film was the pioneer of Taiwan New Wave Cinema.

The fact that The Sandwich Man managed to make it to the screen without any cuts must have been a valuable learning experience for Hou Hsiao-hsien as co-director. For the release of A City of Sadness, Hou pushed the political taboo even further by revealing the February 28 Incident scandal overseas before showing the film in Taiwan. It was a gamble but it paid off for Hou, who gained success both in overseas and in Taiwan. Unfortunately for Hou, A City of Sadness did not win the Best Film Award at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival. One of the reasons for this was that the jury had a KMT background.

Following this discussion of Hou’s background in terms of his family and his early films, I will now discuss the specifics of his later films.

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18 Wikipedia: Er Zi de Da Wan Ou [The Sandwich Man]. (n.d.). Retrieved 19 August, 2011, from http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki%E5%85%92%E5%AD%90%E7%9A%84%E5%A4%A7%E7%8E%A9%E5%81%B6 (%E9%9B%BB%E5%BD%B1)

19 A City of Sadness insinuates that the February 28 Incident was caused by the KMT, which might be the reason why this film was not favoured by the jury, who had a KMT background.
Hou’s career development in the past decade

In this thesis, I focus on Hou’s historical films and how these particular films are related to my personal story mentioned in the introduction. Therefore Hou’s later films are not as pertinent as Taiwanese trilogy and Three Times in this thesis. In the last decade, Hou has focused on making films overseas in Japan and France, which seem to be apolitical and merely about family stories. With the possible exception of his short film, The Electric Princess House (2007) implying the brutality of White Terror in a poetic and symbolic way, his work since this time has moved on to a different track.

Before introducing Hou’s films in the past decade except his retrospective historical film Three Times (2005), I intend to discuss why Hou moved his film base outside of Taiwan, such as Café Lumière (2003) in Japan and Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge (2008) in France. One of the reasons can be found in Hou’s interview with a Taiwanese film critic, Wen Tian-xiang in 2008. Hou explained that,

Before going to Japan, I had never thought about making films overseas, because film to me is the objective representation of reality. Film basically needs to be very realistic, and put details into practice. Human behaviour and reaction are different because of their life and cultural differences. How can a person judge and use the foreign material if s/he does not understand the other cultures? You cannot judge at all! But before the shooting of Café Lumière, my creation was at the stage of optional. Basically, there are no materials I must film and the big environment makes fund raising difficult. Therefore, I do not have other special intentions. Coincidentally, I encounter the one-hundredth anniversary of Ozu’s birth. Shochiku invites me to make a film. I, therefore, decide to give it a try (Mao, 2008).

From Hou’s talk, we realise that even the decision of going with the flow as he called “coincidental” might not be accidental because the “big environment” makes it difficult for film fundraising and he is lacking in new materials to shoot. As a result, coming out from Hou’s comfort zone and seeking new material becomes his priority. Udden (2009) noticed something interesting about Hou’s relationship with Ozu that,

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20 My translation.
The problem is, contrary to what many think, Ozu was a highly editing-based director, unlike Hou. Moreover, even though Hou himself often speaks of Ozu, he does so not because he can identify with him, but because he envies how successfully Ozu captured contemporary Japan, something Hou has been unable to do with contemporary Taiwan (pp. 172–173).

If we observe Hou’s films carefully, it seems that Hou’s specialty is to shoot film in a retrospective and nostalgic way. For some reasons, he failed to portray young people’s life in contemporary Taiwan, such as Liang Jing in *Good Men, Good Women*, Vicky in *Millennium Mambo* (2000), and Ouyang Jing in *A Time for Youth* in *Three Times*. Perhaps Hou does not experience the modernity himself and Hou is aware of his drawbacks. In the French film, *Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge*, Hou presents a contemporary France, which Hou has not experienced himself, successfully.\(^{21}\) He borrows the material of the French short film, *Le Ballon Rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), which enables him to portray the contemporary France embodied with the old France from a child’s perspective.

In order to understand Hou thoroughly, I also provide a reading of Hou’s film production in the past decade as follows.

*Café Lumière* (2003)

When it comes to Jiang Wen-ye, he has a complicated political background and cannot be the main focus in a Taiwanese film.\(^ {22}\) That makes Hou always interested in shooting a film about Jiang. In memory of Ozu, Hou decided to make a film about Jiang in a Japanese film. Hou observed that Ozu loves to portray family life, especially father-and-daughter relationship. However, in *Café Lumière*, set in 2003’s Tokyo, the human

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\(^{21}\) *Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge* was originally a warm invitation of short film from Musée d’Orsay but in the end the museum withdrew from the invitation and only provided the occasion for the film because of Hou’s change to make it a feature film. See The interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien by Wen Tian-xiang (2008). Retrieved 5 May, 2012, from http://www.funscreen.com.tw/head.asp?H_No=196&period=159 [my translation]

relationship becomes distant and not as close as before. Yuko from Japan was teaching Japanese in Taiwan. After she went back to Japan, she realised that she was pregnant by her Taiwanese student, the son of the umbrella manufacturer boss. However, she decided not to tell her boyfriend about her pregnancy and raise the child by herself, which made her father and step-mother speechless and worry. While wondering around in Japan, she met an owner of a second bookshop and they were doing research about Jiang’s life and music together. Meanwhile their ambiguous friendship started.

*The Electric Princess House* (2007)

Hou’s second last short film, *The Electric Princess House*, which is made for Cannes Film Festival 2007 (Theme: To Each His Own Cinema)23. This film is less than five minutes but it covers many political issues. At first we see one cyclist riding a bike and some people walking in front of the cinema, which shows the film posters of *The Beautiful Duckling* (養鴨人家) (Li Xing, 1965), and other realistic romance films from France and Japan. As a result, we know the setting is in 1965. The background music is a Hokkien song. After a while, a military car stopped in front of the cinema and the KMT soldiers also entered the cinema. Then, we see the lifting of the red curtain because of the wind, and the focus shifted from the outside to inside of the cinema. Surprisingly, there was no audience in the cinema. The seats were all covered with dust, like a wasteland. We only see a film showing in the dark, which was about a girl driving a bumper car in an amusement park. Without reading the film closely, the scene from the lifting of the red curtain to the empty cinema resembles Tsai Ming-liang’s beginning and ending scenes in *Good Bye, Dragon Inn* (2003).

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23 *The Electric Princess House*, is an inclusion in *To Each His Own Cinema* (French: *Chacun son cinéma: une déclaration d’amour au grand écran*) in a 2007 French anthology film commissioned for the 60th anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival.
First of all, the film, *The Beautiful Duckling* was one of the healthy realism film productions. Under the situation that Taiwan’s economy was not booming yet and it was under the village reform and the construction of countries and towns. The filmmakers in Taiwan caught the moment to make a series of films on the topic of health and the stories are shown in a realistic way. That has accomplished an era of healthy realism films on a grand occasion. The healthy realism film not only means the combination of the Taiwanese film cultural development and its politics and economics, but also has the function of making people have “social control” and then to be obedient to the government (Yeh & Davis, 2005, pp. 27–30). Interestingly, the film title and subtitles have to be read from right to left, which implies the ideology of the anti-left. Later, the policy to read Mandarin subtitles changes from left to right in Taiwan because of the influence of the U.S. reading. Therefore, one film’s poster has embodied so many political meanings, not to mention the arrival of the KMT’s car. The transitional shot of the curtain is to distinguish the crowds of people and the noisy music to the dead silence of the cinema. Watching this film reminds me of the White Terror started from 1950s till the lifting of martial law in 1987. This dead silent cinema implies that the prevalence of Hokkien is not allowed under the government’s monolingualism policy. The emptiness of the cinema also signifies that the political victims all vanished. In the end, only a little girl was in the bumper car implying that the political victim left the child in the world. In Hou’s previous films, the interior space with people is the main focus and the exterior space of natural landscape is the transitional shot to create mood and narrative ‘breathing space’ (Nornes & Yeh, 1994). However, this film starts from outside of the cinema (exterior space which is packed with people) to the cinema (interior space which is empty). If the girl in the film screened inside the empty cinema is the lead actress, her own “space” of the whole cinema is evidence of the brutality of KMT rule.
The film of the daily life shots of an ordinary girl reminds us of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens, 1959). In the end, a little girl’s diary became the proof of the cruelty of the politics. Hou’s film here uses the endnote of Tsai’s *Good Bye, Dragon Inn*, but the meaning is totally different as Tsai’s interest in shooting the film is to grasp the image just before they tear down the old cinema, while Hou’s *The Electric Princess House* shows evidence of the cultural hegemony and the cruelty of political power. Fortunately, the home video captured the best time for the little girl.


This film is inspired by a French short film *Le Ballon Rough*. The difference is that the story focuses on three main characters, Simon, his mother, Suzanne and his nanny, Song from China. Suzanne is a professor specialising in puppetry. She lives separately from her daughter from the first marriage and her current partner, who is Simon’s father. Having a stressful urban life as a single mother, she hired Song to take care of her son. Song is a film student in Paris and her kindness and warmth made Simon less lonely even though he seemed to be spoiled in the materialistic way that he had piano lessons and played computer games like many children nowadays. The little boy started to learn about how to make films because of Song. In one scene, the puppet master, Li Tian-lu’s son, was invited to Suzanne’s university to show the students the beauty of Taiwanese puppet theatre as an extension of Hou’s *The Puppetmaster* (1993) about Li Tian-lu’s autobiography. In the interview by Wen Tian-xiang, Hou mentioned that,

At first, I was afraid of making a French film as I did not know anything about France. I could only think about it from the experiences of attending some Cannes Film Festivals and reading some French novels. But after watching *Le Ballon Rough* made me think about that was exactly how I felt when I was little. Parents and teachers were strict. People were not rich at that time and children were easily contented. Even one red balloon could make children happy. Nowadays children have too many toys and a
red balloon is nothing much compared to before. In my opinion, red balloon is like an old soul taking care of the child no matter where he goes (Mao, 2008).

Therefore, Hou believes the red balloon means an old soul taking care of Simon. I think probably it can be seen as the age of innocence/freedom as in the old film, the red balloon was broken by a bad boy. Eventually, the little boy was taken to the sky by many colourful balloons. In the new version, Hou did not give the film a happy atmosphere because of the emotional mother, Suzanne. However, Hou gave it a good ending that the balloon was not broken and Simon was watching the red balloon flying over the top of Musée d'Orsay, Seine, Cathédrale Notre Dame de Parisas and then flying toward the sky, while the little boy’s mind is free again.

*La Belle Epoque* (2011)

The committee of the 48th Golden Horse Film Festival invited twenty brilliant Taiwanese film directors to make a five minutes film for each in 10+10, which is specially made for the centennial year of the establishment of Republic of China on Taiwan. Interestingly, two of the most well-known Taiwanese directors, Ang Lee and Tsai Ming-liang’s films are not included. *La Belle Epoque* is one of the short films made by Hou when he served as the Chairman of the Golden Horse Film Festival. This story is about a mother and a daughter’s talk just before the daughter gets married. In the beginning, we see a big tree in the centre with some small trees in the wind. Then, the setting changes to some children playing in the hall way in the house, which is followed by the mother and daughter sitting in the *tatami* mat interior place. The mother gives the daughter the most precious treasure in life, some gold passed from the lead actress’ grandparents and great grandparents,

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24 My translation.

25 For some reasons, *La Belle Epoque* reminded me of a famous Taiwanese literature, *One Set of Golden Bracelets* (一對金手鐲) by Qi Jun (琦君). It is about two sisters were given the same kind of gold bracelets when they were born. One sister is in Taiwan and another was sent to China. Then, their fates are totally different. See (Qi, 1976).
the jade necklace as a souvenir from her uncle who went to China to do business when China was just opening up and also her precious engagement ring. The tatami mat décor, the colourful curtain sometimes raised by the wind in the background, and the fan that the mother held with her remind me of my grandmother’s place in the south of Taiwan. By looking at the life treasure, the daughter starts to think about her childhood with her parents and siblings, which is presented in black and white. In the end, the daughter takes a photo with her big family, which is followed by the natural scene of trees in the breeze again. This films is purely about the mother and daughter relationship; as an audience, I could feel the summer breeze in the film as well. The title of the film La Belle Epoque means the beautiful era in French. It might be similar to Hou’s comments on the Mandarin Title of Three Times, Zui Hao de Shiguang, meaning the best time: the best time is not necessarily the best. We think it is the best because we have lost it.

Currently, Hou is making a Chinese martial art film called Nie Yin Niang. The era is in the Tang Dynasty. If we look back to Hou’s journey in the past decade, it is very interesting. He travelled from Japan to France, to Taiwan then China again. Probably, just as what Hou said, in 2003, the big environment was not good and the film fundraising became very difficult. Therefore, he was seeking overseas opportunities. If we look at Hou’s work from 2003, we could feel that Café Lumière is in memory of Yasujiro Ozu’s Tokyo Story, Le Voyage du Ballon Rouge stems from Le Ballon Rough by Albert Lamorisse, and The Electric Princess House uses the endnote of Tsai Ming-liang’s Good Bye, Dragon Inn. Is it possible that Hou is recycling the old material and make the oldness become innovative again as he mentioned that he did not have anything specific to shoot about in 2003? Probably, opening the foreign window also opens up Hou’s horizon. Now he is able to make a dialogue with the film masters no matter which era and place they come from.
From Taiwan, China, Japan, France, and then back to Taiwan and China again over the past decades, Hou’s Taiwanese/Chinese spirit has travelled with him in the films no matter where he goes. The journey of seeking international and his compatriots’ recognition in Hou’s films best reflects his Taiwan experience and the current political phenomena in Taiwan. Hou does not tell the audience where Taiwan should go but suggests the redefinition of Taiwanese in his films. After 2000, Hou’s film career has been shifting from domestic to overseas that Hou has started to have another mission—the best way to understand a culture is to observe it through another culture. His foreign films, in a way, not only help his overseas audience to understand Taiwanese culture but also prompt Taiwanese audience to reflect on their lives through comparisons with other cultures.

**The specialty of Hou’s films**

There are two striking aspects of Hou’s cinematography style that should be highlighted. One is the similarities between Hou and the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu’s cinematography. Here, I reference Hou’s use of the low-angle technique (Tam & Dissanyake, 1998, p. 47), trains and transitional shots of landscape (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, p. 373), which illustrate the similarities and differences between these two directors’ styles, and how the 51-year Japanese colonisation influenced Hou’s films. The second aspect is the reflective Eastern philosophy and photographic realism of Hou’s films. Hou was enlightened by the philosophy of the literary scholar Shen Congwen, whose influences are detailed along with Hou’s cinematography to convey Hou’s central point, “being an impartial observer to life and death in the state of nature”.

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26 Ozu’s narration alternates between scenes of story action and inserted portions that lead us to or away from them. As we watch the film, we start to form expectations about these “wedged-in” shots. Ozu emphasises stylistic patterning by creating anticipation about when a transition will come and what it will show. The patterning may delay our expectations and even creates some surprises. See Bordwell & Thompson (2001).

27 Interview with Hou Hsiao-hsien by Olivier Assayas in *The Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* in 1997.
transitional shots, poetic style, and Eastern reflective philosophy, Hou’s cinematography plays an important role in recent Asian film and has gained international recognition. Although Hou’s films are always shot in interior spaces, exterior landscapes are often used for transition from one shot to another. It is this style, combined with his use of long takes and static camera movement, which distinguishes Hou from other film directors.

I will review Hou’s cinematography in three parts. First, the resemblance between Hou’s and Ozu’s cinematography will be discussed, followed by an outline of Eastern philosophy and photographic realism. Lastly, I provide an overview of Hou’s unique and distinctive cinematography.

**Similarities and differences between Hou and Ozu.** There are many patent similarities between the works of Hou and Ozu. Vincent Canby observed, “Mr. Hou has studied the work of the masters and borrowed their methods and manners to express feelings that, though authentic and true, ultimately seem second-hand because his film language is not his own” (1988, p. 13). Canby is referring to Hou’s use of Ozu-like transitional shots and the low-angle technique.

Ozu’s trademark is his use of transitional shots, which have also been labelled “pillow shots.” Very similar to Hou’s transitional shots, these shots tend to be of exterior landscape, showing the surroundings in which the characters live. These shots are random, with no relevance to the continuity of the plot. An example of pillow shots can be seen in Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*. Ozu begins with a random opening shot of the train station, next he shoots the clouds, followed by hanging clothes and then the empty streets. In this way Ozu uses multiple shots to show the surroundings randomly.

Hou’s style is different in that his transitional shots are usually singular and have particular relevance to the continuity of the plot. In *A City of Sadness*, for example, Wen-liang and the Shanghainese attend to Monkey’s dead body. We then see a transitional shot of
the landscape. The next scene is followed by an intellectual discussion concerning the police hitting a woman’s head, namely, foreshadowing the February 28 Incident. The transitional shot here is used to indicate that Monkey’s death is the event that triggers the February 28 Incident, as we later observe through Wen-xiong’s death. This transitional shot is a single shot and it holds great significance for the plot.

For Nornes and Yeh (1994), the transitional shots also create mood or “breathing spaces”:

in Ozu’s case … Between scenes he would always place carefully framed shots of the surroundings to signal changes in setting, as well as for less scriptable reasons … While Hou’s transitions evoke similar effects, a notable difference is that Hou’s are usually single shots … Ozu’s transitions often involve such playful graphic matching of shapes and spaces through a series of shots, while Hou appears more interested in using his long-take transitions to create mood and narrative ‘breathing space.’

For example, there is a scene where we see Wen-qing sitting solemnly on a tatami mat, lamenting over the deaths of the innocent political victims, and then the next scene is the transitional shot of a tree, followed by the reading of an innocent political victim’s will and the grief of his family members. The transitional shot is introduced with purpose, to create a sombre mood, as well as to provide the audience with some ‘breathing space’ before Hou reiterates his idea.

While many have criticised Hou’s work for his imitation of Ozu, Nornes and Yeh (1994) insist that Hou’s work is unique and original in that “Hou prefers single transitional shots while Ozu prefers multiple transitional shots without connection and connotation. The differences in technique support the idea that Hou’s work is original.”

Another similarity between Ozu and Hou is their use of trains in films. Hou uses trains to represent the passage of history and life, while Ozu uses trains to show the transience of nature. In A City of Sadness, trains appear three times. The first appearance of a train is placed strategically to represent the end of Japanese rule. The Japanese Principal,
Xiao-chuan, is seen standing on the platform waiting for the train for his permanent departure. The running train in this scene is symbolic of the end of Japanese rule. Xiao-chuan represents the Japanese colonisers, whose rule ends with his departure. A train appears for the second time in a setting featuring Wen-qing and local Taiwanese men. The mute Wen-qing is shown on a train being harassed by local Taiwanese strangers. This scene represents the passage of history and time as we now move past the February 28 Incident to the riots that followed. Wen-qing is seen to represent the Taiwanese Mainlanders who were innocently victimised by angry Taiwanese rioters. The last scene with a train occurs during the arrest of Wen-qing by KMT soldiers for supporting Kuan-rong in publishing underground anti-government publications. In this scene the passing of trains shows the passage of history to the end of the rebellion and the resolution of the Incident. The KMT soldiers represent the government that finally restores order. Hou uses trains to represent the passage of time to help convey a story. In such a way, we see the rite of passage of characters in Hou’s films through the use of train symbolism.

Ozu also uses trains scenes in many of his films. In An Autumn Afternoon (1962), Early Summer (1951), and Late Spring (1949), the establishing shots all contain train scenes. In Record of a Tenement Gentleman (1947) and Tokyo Story (1953), train scenes are repeated over and over again. Ozu shows trains coming and going to suggest the transience of nature. In Tokyo Story, Shukichi and his wife Tomi travel by train from their hometown to visit their children in Tokyo. On arrival, they find their children too busy to spend time with them. Throughout the film, Ozu shows countless scenes of the couple sitting silently and fanning themselves, while we see shot after shot of trains passing through the Japanese countryside. When the couple eventually returns to the countryside a few days later, the mother dies. Now, the children travel to the countryside. Ozu uses trains to show the passage of time and the transience of nature. We hear the sound of passing trains as well as seeing them.
While it appears that Hou has been influenced by Ozu, Alan Stanbrook (1990) stated, “Hou has always maintained that the Ozu flavour many have observed in his work is purely coincidental because at the time it was first remarked upon, he had never seen an Ozu film” (p. 121). Whether or not this is the case, there are clearly marked similarities between these two directors. It is claimed that Japanese post-colonial influence (such as architecture and culture) has made Hou’s film Ozu-like, but this does not mean that Hou is not original (Norne and Yeh, 1994). In fact, Hou is quite original, as there are a few differences shown below. Further similarities between them can also be seen in their use of the low-angle technique. As Nornes and Yeh (1994) observe:

Hou does place his camera close to the ground at times, however, this is almost exclusively in scenes set inside Japanese architecture. As a former Japanese colony, Taiwan has had many Japanese style buildings, or rooms with tatami mats. In A City of Sadness Wen-qing’s home has several rooms, and scenes set here use a camera relatively close to the ground. Because people sit on the floor in these spaces, it only makes sense to lower the camera so it does not look down on them. In this sense, Hou is actually similar to most Japanese directors, who also place the camera at a low angle when shooting in traditional Japanese spaces.

Figure 1.1 Interior scene: Tokyo Story  Figure 1.2 Interior scene: A City of Sadness

Therefore, the difference is that Hou reserves the low-angle technique for scenes set inside Japanese style architecture. The two shots pictured above show a slight difference between the camera angle in Hou’s A City of Sadness and Ozu’s Tokyo Story. Although both scenes are shots of tatami mats, Ozu’s camera angle is positioned lower than Hou’s. For instance, in Tokyo Story, the opening scene of Shukichi and Tomi packing their luggage is
filmed in a position that aligns perfectly with their sitting position. Further, it can be regarded as a child’s viewpoint since the height of the camera equals the height of a child (Geist, 1992). Ozu uses the low-angle technique to simulate people sitting on tatami mats, a technique likely inherited from his Japanese culture. Also, the low camera position may ascribe a feeling of innocence to the parents, as we see them from a child’s point of view.

Hou uses the low-angle technique, much like Ozu, only when shooting inside traditional Japanese spaces, and when he shoots a scene in a modern setting, he uses a standard lens to represent space. Alan Stanbrooks (1990) argues for Hou’s originality, suggesting that it is more likely the Japanese cultural influence that has affected Hou’s cinematography rather than Ozu himself. He states, “Ozu, after all, was part of the Japanese cultural heritage and for more than fifty years Taiwanese life was imbued with it. Hou may have arrived after the Japanese had left the island, but their legacy lingered on” (Stanbrook, 1990, p.121).

I agree with the proposition that Hou’s use of the low-angle technique was more likely influenced by Japanese colonisation rather than by Ozu, as is evidenced by Hou’s use of the low-angle technique only for scenes set inside Japanese architecture. Regarding Hou’s use of transitional shots, I suggest this style is unique and different.

**Eastern philosophy and photographic realism.** Unique to *A City of Sadness* is Hou’s Eastern philosophical beliefs (namely, that life and death are insignificant in nature) and Hou’s use of photography to represent history. Hou has adopted this philosophy from the literature of Shen Congwen (1987) and uses static camera and long takes to represent these beliefs on screen. Hou also provides a unique perspective on history through photography.
Eastern Philosophy

詩中有畫，畫中有詩

There are pictures in the poem, and there are poems in the picture.

—蘇軾 Su Shi

此中有真意，欲辯已忘言

It means something, but I have forgotten what to say.

—陶淵明 Tao Yianming

Hou’s films centre on the theme of the continuity of life despite hardships and misfortunes. A significant influence on his work is Shen Congwen, whose philosophy is that no matter how sad or horrible a thing is, it can be endured and forgiven by love (Meng, 2000, p. 33). Hou’s style is generally detached from emotions and indifferent to life and death. Throughout A City of Sadness, this objective is apparent. Hou shows that the February 28 Incident has had little impact on family routine. Time, life and death continue in the state of nature. To represent this ideology, Hou largely uses “long takes” and “static camera.” Through his camera techniques, Hou enables the viewer to perceive life, death and history indifferently. It is this Eastern reflective philosophy embodied in Hou’s work that makes it unique.

During Hou’s earlier years as a director, he struggled to find his own style. After reading Shen Congwen’s autobiography (Shen, 1987), he found a central point in all of his...
artwork and was able to understand himself more deeply. Inspired by Shen, Hou created his own trademark, based on a detached style of filmmaking that cannot be reproduced by other filmmakers. As Hou stated in an interview with Zhang Jing-pei in 1990: “I usually look at things superficially … because this kind of thinking is objective thinking. I want to look at things from Shen Congwen’s point of view, as an ‘impartial observer of life and death’” (Zhang, 1990, pp. 69–70).

Hou started to believe that human’s pain and suffering are insignificant in the greater scheme of things, no matter what happens, life goes on.

In *A City of Sadness*, Hou uses the static camera to express his beliefs during a funeral. The static camera remains in the distance, which signifies the viewpoint of a bystander or onlooker. Hou does not change shot to focus on the funeral or on the grieving family members. Instead, he keeps the camera in the distance to show events unfolding. This technique is intended to symbolise that life goes on despite the death of loved ones. It is this detached style that enables “political oppression or violent incidents in history to be represented without close-ups of massacres” (Shen, 2000, pp. 79–80).

The static camera technique is also used during the final scene in *A City of Sadness*. Emilie Yeh (2001) in her “Politics and Poetics of Hou-Hsiao Hsian’s Films” commented:

Hou’s intention is to depict and preserve the ‘quotidian space’ of Taiwan … Eating occurs in all of Hou’s films, not just once but several times. Again, the meaning of a daily ritual often goes beyond its surface (p. 71).

Hou’s use of repetition of simple daily rituals also implies that people are always busy, too busy in life to involve themselves in politics. Here I concur with Yeh, as the meaning of daily ritual is often not as simple as it appears. At the dining table the only males who remain are the grandson, the mentally handicapped Wen-liang and the old invalid grandfather. Hou uses the static camera to show people eating, a necessity in life, and uses this scene to represent
his idea that life goes on despite family misfortunes. His philosophy is that the trials and tribulations of life are insignificant in the state of nature. Furthermore, he believes that history and the passage of time are inevitable. As Meng Hongfeng (2000) observed, “Hou likes to shoot eating … while eating, we can see this nation surviving and progressing. Despite times of misery, life can be enjoyed through eating” (p. 46).

Hou avoids using close-ups and uses long takes over and over again. Similar to a long shot, the long take represents observation from a distance. Hou also avoids showing violence and brutality on screen, preferring to allow the viewer to use his or her imagination. Hou attempts to present an objective view of violence, without the bias that may arise through graphic depiction or close-ups.

When Kuan-mei is pregnant, Hou uses a long take to show her buying rice dumplings in the market. In the following scene, Kuan-mei’s newborn baby is seen eating with her. The audience does not witness the birth on screen, so we do not see the hardship of labour. In this way, Hou avoids displaying emotion on screen, suggesting that he is indifferent to birth, life and death.

Hou’s use of long takes and static camera technique has been questioned, with some critics stating that his use of the static camera “comes from objective limitations when [he shoots] a film, such as the shortage of funds” (Zhu, 1989, pp. 23–24). However, Hou does use close-ups occasionally, especially when conveying powerful emotions, suggesting that Hou prefers the use of long takes and static camera to enhance his detached style.

Photographic realism. If “to see is to believe,” then the only real way to witness history is to see it in person. Hou challenges this idea by representing on screen a hidden history more than fifty years after the events took place. This approach does have its limitations, as many of those directly involved died in the February 28 Incident and the memories of the survivors transform with time. Therefore, the only medium that captures
history vividly, as it occurred, is photography. Hou uses photographic realism in *A City of Sadness* in an attempt to present history from another perspective, as it happened. Through the lens of Wen-qing, Hou provides another avenue to witness history, which opens an avenue of audience interpretation. In *A City of Sadness*, the photos we see on screen are pictures of united families, buildings, and friends. These pictures are used to show that people and objects once existed in time and they are not purely facets of our imagination. Wen-qing communicates this through writing and photography. Photography in the film provides another kind of representation of non-verbal historical memory.

Revisiting history through photography may not be totally accurate, but at least photography can provide another avenue of historical representation showing partial truth. Photography does not reflect true history. To some extent, it tells people what happened in the past and makes people self-reflect. Yeh suggests that “photography vacillates between the contrast of ‘missing’ and ‘existence,’ which attempts to make the audience catch the meanings and expand them to some extent” (2000, pp. 206–207). In other words, photographs catch moments in time, which are open to interpretation and error. Photographic realism shows memories that existed at a point in time.

**Hou’s films in the eyes of scholars and the Taiwanese**

Because Hou made a Ministry of Defence recruitment TV commercial, *All for Tomorrow [Yiqie wei Mingtian]*, many Taiwanese believe that Hou supports the KMT government. However, Hou regards himself as a filmmaker in constant opposition to the current government of Taiwan (Ge, 2004, A2). The following excerpt demonstrates Hou’s dedication to promoting ethnic harmony:

On January 18th, 2004, just before the presidential election, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Nan Fang Shuo (pseudonym), founding members of a group promoting peace among Taiwan’s ethnic groups during the election, expressed their disappointment with presidential candidates Lian Zhan and President Chen for not making progress in their campaign tactics. The group gave both camps a big, fat “zero” score for continuing to
resort to mudslinging to get ahead in the polls (Shih, 2004, p. 19).

The issue of Taiwan’s ethnic groups can also be observed in Chris Berry’s article “A Nation T(w/o)”:  

Hou’s films, in particular *A City of Sadness*, deploy the Chinese language to provide the grounds for simultaneously imagining Taiwan as a community in its own right, as a collective self, and for that selfhood as being constituted by the very hybrid space that films construct (1994, p. 56).

Berry further explains:  

That Taiwan should provide a fruitful ground for the construction of a hybrid imagined community is no surprise when one considers its complex history. The island has been traversed by so many colonising powers at different times in its history that it is almost impossible to integrate it credibly into any sort of eternalised national entity, although one must acknowledge that the present government has worked so hard to do so…there are both Japanese and Chinese creation myths for Taiwan, each of which securely identifies it as part of that entity’s claimed heritage (1994, p. 56).

Berry has identified the difficult predicament of Taiwan’s government: to make Taiwan an integrated national identity in this hybrid space. *A City of Sadness* reflects the multiple ethnic groups in Taiwan around 228. What is striking is that Hou uses 228 to project his voice internationally, but he does not want the presidential election campaigns to “recycle 228 issues” in the name of promoting peace among Taiwan’s ethnic groups. This political ambiguity merits discussion, as there is some confusion surrounding how people perceive Hou’s films and how he describes himself. The particular socio-cultural background of Taiwan and Hou’s unique perspective of it raise a number of significant questions. To what extent are they a reflection of Taiwanese society, culture and the position of women in post-war and contemporary Taiwan? And what historical factors influenced Taiwanese society and culture, in turn influencing Hou’s films?
Hou’s films and their reflection of society and culture in post-war and contemporary Taiwan

Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films are always related to women, particularly to women in micro-history. In her article “Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien,” June Yip (1997) observed:

The final image of the film [The Puppetmaster] shows men, women, and children tearing apart planes that have been abandoned in a bombed-out airfield, salvaging the metal. It is an eloquent reminder that, for ordinary citizens, the dramas of public political history mean very little. They have no time to contemplate the significance of Japan’s surrender or Taiwan’s ‘glorious liberation’; they are too busy with the daily task of living (p. 156).

Yip interprets the final scene of The Puppetmaster as implying that Taiwanese citizens are too busy in their quotidian activities, related to survival, to think too much about the change of political power. My interpretation of this scene, however, differs: Li Tian-lu “rescues” a number of Japanese soldiers from an angry Taiwanese mob. This could be interpreted as a statement that the Taiwanese do have a strong identity as Taiwanese and are unhappy with Japanese rule. Rather than seeing the final scene as suggesting that people are busy with the day-to-day, I would argue that the tearing apart of the aeroplanes represents “the great leap” movement in Mainland China, as the “new” government in Taiwan is the enemy of the Chinese Communist government on the Mainland. The era of the Japanese is gone, but the new Chinese rule is associated with much crisis. What the Taiwanese can do is to hope for a better tomorrow: the sky is still blue in The Puppetmaster’s final scene. (The image of the KMT flag represents blue sky.)

Conclusion

Hou is a controversial film director, and his involvement with politics makes his historical films more ambiguous and difficult to watch due to their multiple dimensions. This chapter has provided an introduction to the micro/macro-history of Taiwan, followed by a
detailed introduction to Hou Hsiao-hsien’s background and his initial and later films. Also, I have provided interpretations of scholars’ views on Hou and his films to show his uniqueness and the complexity of his films. The next chapter will analyse Hou’s most successful international debut, *A City of Sadness*, in terms of whether women can be part of history.
Chapter Two:
Are Women Included in History? The Debate of Micro-history and Macro-history in
A City of Sadness

I heard a feminist ask: “How should we read what is going on in China in terms of gender?” My immediate response to that question was, and is, “We do not, because at the moment of shock Chinese people are degendered and become simply Chinese” (Chow, 1991, p. 82).

Many scholars in the fields of cultural studies, film studies, historical studies, and gender studies have discussed Hou Hsiao-hsien’s A City of Sadness, as it is one of the most important films in Taiwanese history. It engages with the February 28 Incident, which was buried in Taiwan’s official history for more than fifty years. Hou’s remaking of the historical films acted as a wake-up call not only for the Taiwanese but also for the government to revisit the seminal incident, to think about the present and to reconsider what the best is for the people of Taiwan in the future. This chapter focuses on the debate about whether women are included in history, through an analysis of A City of Sadness.

In A City of Sadness, we see the Lin family’s story narrated by a housewife, Kuan-mei. From her diary, we sense how happy the Lin family is when the KMT arrives in Taiwan, and how the Lin family’s fate changes after the February 28 Incident. The ups and downs of the Lin family’s fortunes can also be seen as a microcosm of social phenomena in Taiwan from the 1930s to the 1940s. Taiwanese film critic Mizou (1991) argues that, even though Hou uses a housewife, Kuan-mei, to tell the story of the Lin family, women still cannot “enter” history. Emilie Yeh (2000), on the other hand, posits that through the use of sound and writing, women are working towards granting micro-history (family history) space to enter macro-history (official history). Both assume that women are excluded from history. Yet, if
one argues that women have to “enter” history, what does “enter” mean? Can women be part of history? First I will review not only of Taiwanese but also some Chinese films by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige to examine how women are presented in Chinese/Taiwanese cinema. Then, applying the theory of the gaze offered by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001, p. 100), I will explain the importance of reading images carefully to garner the meaning behind them. Lastly, I will apply the idea of yin and yang to discuss micro-history and macro-history in Hou’s *A City of Sadness*.  

*A City of Sadness* is a “political” film and as such is controversial among Taiwanese society. One reason for this controversy is the use of a female narrator, which helps Hou to avoid criticism of his insights into Taiwanese history in the context of Taiwan’s strict censorship. To illustrate a political background, I will first provide a synopsis of *A City of Sadness*.

**A synopsis of A City of Sadness**

*A City of Sadness* is a film that indirectly relates to the February 28 Incident. It is set in 1945, and presents the turbulent transitional period of post-Japanese colonisation. Through the use of narrative and the juxtaposition of the small country town Juifen (九份) in Taiwan, where the film is set, Hou represents the historical events that took place during this period. The film explores the relationships between Taiwan, Japan and China, and to represent these ties in the film, Hou uses several human relationships. He utilises the Lin family’s four sons and their tragic fates to demonstrate the devastation wrought in Taiwanese families and their daily lives during this transitional period. The film depicts the Lin family’s experiences

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31 In this thesis, “macro-history” refers to official history and “micro-history” to the individual/family history.
during the February 28 Incident. The eldest brother Wen-xiong is murdered by a Shanghai mafia boss; the second brother Wen-sen goes to the South Sea to fight for Japan in the war but never comes back; the third brother Wen-liang suffers a traumatic brain injury in a KMT prison, and the youngest brother Wen-qing, who is both deaf and mute, hopes to flee to the mountains with his friend to fight in the anti-KMT resistance movement. By the end of the film even Wen-qing has been arrested by the authorities, leaving only his wife to tell the story of the family’s destruction.

Several characters play pivotal roles: Wen-qing, Wen-xiong, Ah-jia, Wen-liang, Kuan-mei, Kuan-rong and Old Wu. Wen-qing is the youngest of Lin Ah-lu’s four sons. Played by the famous Hong Kong actor Tony Leung, Wen-qing is a deaf-mute photographer who represents the silenced Taiwanese population. Wen-qing’s deafness began in the production as an expedient means of disguising the fact actor Tony Leung’s couldn’t speak Taiwanese (or Japanese – the language taught in Taiwan’s schools during the 51-year occupation), but wound up being an effective means to demonstrate the brutal insensitivity of Chen Yi’s ROC administration.\(^{32}\) Wen-qing’s role in A City of Sadness is to act as a witness to the events that culminated in the February 28 Incident. He represents the oppressed voice of the people following the introduction of martial law. Just as Wen-qing witnessed the February 28 Incident, so did the Taiwanese population. However, the Taiwanese were unable to speak of the Incident, just as the mute Wen-qing is unable to speak. Wen-qing eventually gets involved in politics and is arrested for assisting in illegal political movements.

Wen-xiong is a man in his forties. He is the eldest of the four sons and, together with his second wife, operates a brothel named “Little Shanghai.” “Little Shanghai” welcomes foreigners and locals and provides an avenue for people to negotiate business. Wen-xiong

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dies when he tries to help his brother-in-law, Ah-jia, in a fight that takes place in his brothel. This is the event that best represents the February 28 Incident.

Ah-jia is Wen-xiong’s brother-in-law. Involved with the Shanghainese traders, Ah-jia attempts to smuggle rice and sugar to China because Shanghai has control over these rights. Furthermore, his friends engage in other illegal activities, such as producing counterfeit money.\(^{33}\) Ah-jia’s role in *A City of Sadness* is to represent growing social and political unrest, as well as the widespread corruption of this transitional period.

Wen-liang is the third brother of Lin Ah-lu’s four sons. As an ex-employee of the Japanese, he is imprisoned under regulations allowing “the Punishment of Chinese Traitors.”\(^{34}\) Wen-liang represents the innocent political victims who were mistreated during that era. After his imprisonment, Wen-liang becomes insane. He is the sole survivor of Lin Ah-lu’s four sons.

Kuan-mei is Wen-qing’s wife. As a nurse who works in the hospital, Kuan-mei is quite indifferent to politics. Her busy life, filled with work and love, is fulfilling, despite the political circumstances of the day. Kuan-mei represents that proportion of the population that is indifferent to politics.

Kuan-rong, a school teacher, is Kuan-mei’s brother. He appears frequently throughout the film, engaging in intellectual discussion with the teacher Old Wu. Kuan-rong is exiled to the mountains. Kuan-rong (寬榮) is a name which has the same pronunciation as forgiveness

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\(^{33}\) After World War II, the Taiwanese economy fell, inflation was rampant and Taiwanese currency was severely devalued. See Yeh (2000).

\(^{34}\) Taiwanese, who had at last left behind the old colonial days of the Japanese government, were longing to share the political power. However, the KMT government refused to let the Taiwanese participate, because of a lack of qualified Taiwanese politicians and because the Taiwanese did not speak Mandarin. As a result, there was only one high-ranking Taiwanese, a deputy commissioner, in the Governor-General’s office. The percentage of Taiwanese staff was low in other government departments as well. Government, public corporations and factories became top-heavy with Mainlanders through nepotism by the Chinese officials in the highest echelon. The Taiwanese elite, seeing the mainland officials abuse their authority and the high unemployment rate for Taiwanese, were humiliated by being labelled as “Chinese traitors” or “Japanese slaves”. They could only express their frustration through limited news media where they called for justice. This idea can be seen in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Taiwanese trilogy, *A City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, and *Good Men, Good Women*. See also Chapter Three and Four of this thesis.
in Mandarin. His close relationship with a Japanese friend represents the strong ties that exist between Taiwan and Japan.

Old Wu is a teacher and storyteller. His narration and perspective enable the audience to recognise the changing views of the Taiwanese people. Initially, his narration begins with optimism and hospitality, but as the film progresses he expresses anger and agitation.

Together these characters play a pivotal role in expressing Hou’s views on the February 28 Incident. Hou uses the little country town, Jiufen, to represent the historical events of 1945. Yet where is the city that Hou refers to in *A City of Sadness*? Is he talking about the small town, Jiufen? Or is he talking about Taipei City, where the Incident occurred? Hou’s strategy of using a small town’s tragedy to talk about the February 28 Incident *A City of Sadness* calls into question his real intention in making this film. Is it that Hou actually wants to use “a city’s sadness” to portray Taiwan’s sadness? Or is Hou using a small family story in a small town to illustrate the whole of Taiwan’s tragedy? We must also examine how Hou utilises women in *A City of Sadness* to represent his own political views. Micro-history (a housewife’s family story in a small town, Jiufen) seems to be portrayed in detail to suggest the macro-history (the occurrence of the February 28 Incident in Taipei, Taiwan).

**The importance of film censorship to Hou’s films**

We begin by reviewing Taiwanese cinema, which was examined in Emilie Yeh and Abe Mark Nornes’s (1994) online monograph, “*Beiqing Chengshi (A City of Sadness)*”:

Another thematic re-orientation by the Taiwan New Cinema is the direct reference to political and social taboos. Behind this phenomenon we may find the lifting of martial law in 1987 and the political, social, and diplomatic reform policies that followed, as well as growing demands for more radical reforms from civilians. Three films made in 1989 – *A City of Sadness, Banana Paradise*, and *Gangs of Three* – touched on political controversies that were considered highly sensitive and forbidden in public discourse before 1987.
Even though *A City of Sadness* was released two years after martial law was lifted, censorship at that time did not allow filmmakers to criticise the current government, Kuomintang (KMT, formerly known as the Nationalists). Hou used two strategies to enable this film to be screened in Taiwan. Firstly, he used a family-oriented story narrated by a housewife. In that sense, it seemed that Hou himself could avoid criticism by claiming this was just a housewife’s diary, nothing much to do with the Incident. Those who thought it was politically oriented, he could argue, were overly sensitive. Secondly, *A City of Sadness* won the 46th Venice Film Festival award internationally and was well received by Japanese audience. Due to the widespread publicity, the government was unable to ban this world-recognised film. As a result, the film was screened without any difficulty, but Hou himself drew criticism. At the 46th Venice Film Festival in 1989, he and his advertisers decided to enter *A City of Sadness* in the political film category. However, after Hou returned to Taiwan, just after he won the award at the Venice Film Festival, he claimed that “the film was not intended to focus on the Incident. The Incident is intended to be an index to something larger than man, that is, to nature itself” (Liao, 1991, p. 294). Hou stated that the February 28 Incident could well be seen as an economic rather than a political battle: an inevitable outcome of the deep-seated resentment provoked by the widespread corruption of and exploitation by Nationalist officials.35 This statement seems to reserve his political view, implying that the KMT was not to be blamed for the February 28 Incident and that it arose due to economic issues. Again, as Hou was concerned with the film’s censorship in Taiwan, he was very cautious about expressing his opinion regarding the February 28 Incident. If Hou’s position is ambiguous concerning whether *A City of Sadness* is intended to be political, does the film speak for itself?

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35 This ideology can be seen in Hou’s later film, *Good Men, Good Women*. In the scene, in which a group of local Taiwanese intellectuals are having a meeting about the KMT political domination, one intellectual says that the February 28 Incident could also be seen as an economic, rather than a political battle.
Does *A City of Sadness* face the political issues or avoid them? Critics have argued that the landscape in the film has deep meaning behind it. In order to understand the use of landscape in Hou’s film, I begin with the question of whether landscape in *A City of Sadness* is featured in order to “dilate” the brutality of politics, or whether landscape is just landscape without any further meaning.

The film scholar Liao Bing-hui (1991) stated that the landscape appears to make the issue of the brutality of politics more mild:

> When a political problem arises, the shot switches rapidly. From the real political oppression and violent Incident to the mountain, ocean, and fish boats, [Hou] attempts to displace and misplace the real problem with the beauty of nature and motionless scenery (p. 130).

Further, Shen Xiao-yin (2000) suggests that:

> the appearance of conceptual shots of landscapes in *A City of Sadness* is not usually avoiding [the important political issues] but may be casting doubt on [political problems] and confronting [political problems] … *A City of Sadness* presents a mild attitude toward history, which is a kind of humanitarian concern (pp. 79–80).

Liao believes that the landscape shots are intended to cover the sensitive political issues, while Shen thinks that with the shot of landscape, Hou is confronting history with his pastoral images to show his concern for humanity. I concur with Shen that Hou does not avoid history but confronts history in a reserved way. This is why, when Wen-qing (who just returned from the prison) visits the exiled Kuan-rong and Kuan-rong’s friend (whose family member was just executed in the prison) in the mountain to pass the will of the political prisoner to his friend, we see a peaceful pastoral shot used to unfold the nervous atmosphere. In that sense, landscape, which represents nature, implies that nature is supreme in all realms, including politics.

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37 My translation.
38 Ibid.
Hou’s use of a housewife to narrate his “political” films. In Asian cultures, women seem to be omitted from official history. This idea is exemplified in many of Hou’s films, as well as in those of other directors, such as the Chinese director Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Women are never considered in macro-history, for their role in society is dominated by stereotypes of weakness and passivity, and the family is seen as women’s preferred or only complete world.

*A City of Sadness* is the first production in a Taiwanese trilogy that has received a wide array of responses from around the world. In this film, Hou conveys his perception of what happened between the Taiwanese mainlanders and the Taiwanese locals in the February 28 Incident, and explores why so much hatred and suspicion existed between the two groups afterwards. References to the tobacco monopoly and the smuggling activities of greedy government officials are made early in the film, foreshadowing the February 28 Incident and the escalation of violence in its aftermath. The tragic fates of Kuan-mei, Wen-qing and the rest of the Lin family suggest that the goal of Chen Yi’s military government is not to eradicate “a tiny handful of traitorous rebels” but to indiscriminately punish those people who dare to resist Nationalist rule (U.S. Department of State, 1967, p. 92). Hou highlights the bitterness of the Taiwanese fate of being caught between China and Japan and, in the end, being distrusted or disowned by both sides. In this film, Kuan-mei is the main narrator, who wrote the family story in her diary. From her narration, we see what happened in the micro-history (family story) underlying the macro-history (national story). Mizou (1991), however, argues that, under Hou’s lens, women are alienated from the image on screen. In the following section, I discuss whether women are alienated and thus excluded from history. But first, I review how Chinese women have been shown on screen following the creation of “pseudo-folklore” by Zhang Yimou (Lu, 1997, p. 128).
The gaze at China

Images of Chinese women as victims are repeatedly shown in *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), directed by the well-known Mainland Chinese director, Zhang Yimou. According to Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, Zhang’s filmic representations do nothing more than offer the Western viewer a “gaze” at “China” (Lu, 1997, p. 128). Similarly, Bérénice Reynaud (1993) writes, “What is remarkable about Gong Li [the lead actress in Zhang’s films] is not so much her poise or versatility, but her ability to signify Chineseness, femininity and mystery outside of her own culture” (p. 15). In a way, Zhang is selling Gong Li’s victimised image to the West in order to gain world recognition. Zhang satisfies Westerners’ taste but disappoints his Chinese compatriots. If Zhang highlights an Orientalist Western viewer’s gaze at the East, especially China, how must we interpret the characters’ gaze in the posters of Chinese and Taiwanese films?
The dependence/alienation of women on screen or a different mode of engagement of women on screen?

Figure 2.1 The cover image of *Yellow Earth*

This image of quasi-alienation can be seen in the Mainland Chinese director Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (1984), as shown in Figure 2.1. In 1937, much of north-western China was under Communist control. The lead character, Cuiqiao, is rebellious and refuses her arranged marriage, and then falls in love with a soldier in the Red Army. In one of the scenes, Cuiqiao’s younger brother, and her beloved soldier, Gu Qing, are eating together in the mountains. Both men are shot in one scene, while Cuiqiao is shown alienated as she eats alone. This is one of the finest examples of the alienation of women on screen. When Gu Qing wants to leave, Cuiqiao wants to go with him. He says he needs his officer’s permission and he promises her that he will come back. Later, Cuiqiao marries another man to fulfil her family’s wish and remains unhappy. In the end, she drowns in the Yellow River as a result of her devotion to the army, signifying that she disappears with the Communist revolution (Chow, 1995, pp. 83–85). The cover image for the film exemplifies the alienation of women in history. Cuiqiao in the foreground is self-absorbed, while in the background, we see Cuiqiao lowering her head and begging her beloved soldier to take her to the army. The image implies that if a woman wants to enter history, she needs a man’s permission, and the
answer is not always positive. In addition, the composition of the cover image is very revealing; if it had featured the couple in the foreground, it would seem to be merely a love story. If the image only had Cuiqiao in the foreground without the couple, we would have no idea of what *Yellow Earth* is about. Cuiqiao wears red clothes, looking indirectly at this couple in history and expressing her desire to join the Red Army. This image represents women’s desire to “enter” history.

![Promotional film poster for *A City of Sadness*](image)

**Figure 2.2 The promotional film poster for *A City of Sadness***

In an essay entitled “Can Women Not Enter History? A Discussion of Female Roles in *A City of Sadness,*” Mizou (1991, p. 138) discussed the problematic female role in *A City of Sadness.* Mizou (1991) suggests that:

> a very good example to illustrate the fact that women are alienated … comes from the promotion film poster [see Figure 2.2]; the lead actor Tony Leung’s eyes look into the distance, as if looking into history, focusing on its development, caring about its end (destination). On the contrary, Xin Shu-fen (the actress who plays Kuan-mei) lowers her head, as if in her own world (p. 138).³⁹

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³⁹ My translation.
To further set out my argument, I analyse the composition of the image. Figure 2.2 contains two images. The image above shows Kuan-mei and Wen-qing’s concern about the Incident. The image below shows the photo taken before some Taiwanese soldiers (Lin Wen-liang and Lin Wen-long) went to the South Sea in WWII. The Lin family hangs flags bearing their names to send their best regards and to encourage them before they went to the war.

Interestingly, Kuan-mei seems to be indirectly looking at the soldiers below to visualise history. Therefore, my interpretation, contrary to Mizou’s, is that Wen-qing is looking at nothing, while Kuan-mei is observing history. According to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001),

> The photographic gaze thus helps to establish relationships of power. The person with the camera looks at a person, event, place, or object. The act of looking is commonly thought of as awarding more power to the person who is looking than to the person who is the object of the look. The tradition of institutional photography, in which prisoners, mental patients, and people of various ethnicities were photographed and catalogued, can be related to the traditions of visual anthropology and travel photography as well as to the tradition of painting peoples of so-called exotic locales. All function to varying degrees to represent codes of dominance and subjugation, difference, and otherness (p. 100).

From the above quote we can understand that the one who is gazing at the other tends to be the dominant person in the photograph, while the one who is looked at tends to be an object. The gaze in the image addresses the relationship between men and women in this poster. The gazed-at object tends to be passive and the one who is gazing tends to be active. Cuiqiao and Kuan-mei’s indirect gaze at history in images shows their power which has not been focused in mainstream history. In addition, in both images the male and female gaze are focused in different directions. This suggests that men and women have different points of view on history. By utilising images of women for the film’s cover image and film poster (which is like a synopsis of the film in visual form), both Chen Kaige and Hou Hsiao-hsien successfully instil their political ideology into their cinematic texts. In particular, these two
historical films focus on women’s experience of history more than that of men, which is also reflected in the images.

The promotional film poster (see Figure 2.2) elevates Kuan-mei to a higher level of social standing, giving her more rights to participate in history than an “ordinary woman.” Kuan-mei’s leaning on Wen-qing’s shoulder and Wen-qing’s holding Kuan-mei to his chest show that she is under his protection no matter how bad the political situation is. That shows that in *A City of Sadness*, with men’s permission, women can be included in history.

The image conveys not only the quasi-dependence (Kuan-mei’s leaning on Wen-qing’s shoulder) of women but also the quasi-alienation of women, which is shown in the scene of the final supper in *A City of Sadness*, where the women are busily preparing for dinner but do not eat it. The two women are arranging dishes with their backs turned towards the camera, and then they leave the table; they participate only in micro-history, playing trivial roles before leaving the space. This signifies women’s exclusion from macro-history. This position is further supported when we see Kuan-mei standing cradling her baby while Wen-qing and the others are forced to kneel down in front of the soldiers. Kuan-mei is alienated from macro-history, and thus does not suffer the same fate as the men. Revisiting the question, “Can women enter history in Hou Hsia-hsien’s *A City of Sadness*?”, it seems then, symbolically, that women do “enter” micro-history, but are excluded from macro-history.

Indeed, women’s social position is also determined by a society dominated by men. At the beginning of the film, Kuan-mei obtains a position as a nurse in a mining hospital, thanks to her father’s help. Later, her father is worried about Kuan-mei’s safety, so he does not allow her to work there, insisting that she should stay at home. This implies that Kuan-mei has no choice in deciding her social position in a patriarchal society.
Further, when Wen-qing shares his childhood story with Kuan-mei, a woman wearing heavy make-up and richly decorated traditional attire is on stage singing Beijing opera, as several school children (boys) mock her. This demonstrates that, at this time, even when a woman has a public role on stage, she still draws criticism from men.

While women are excluded and alienated from macro-history in such ways, they are used as a vehicle to convey Hou’s opinions, enabling him to avoid negative views. Arguably, in Chinese culture and cinema, women continue to be alienated from history even when they play pivotal roles in Chinese cinema.

As an alternative interpretation of the images, it can be construed as the women in fact joining history, but in a different mode of engagement. The alienation of women on screen creates a compelling image of them as being constantly excluded from history. Mizou (1991) and Ray Chow (1995) offer a traditional, patriarchal view of the alienation of Chinese women throughout history, but fail to take into account the nuances of the indirect style of Hou and Chen. Through this alternative interpretation it can be argued that Kuan-mei is not alienated; instead, she is joining history in her own way; she writes about how the Incident influences her family and wants to be a nurse to help people. And when the women are preparing dinner in the last scene in A City of Sadness, even though their backs are facing the camera, they are not necessarily excluded from history. Further, the image used in promotional poster can be construed as Kuan-mei thinking about participating in history rather than her exclusion from it.

In Yellow Earth, Cuiqiao wants to join the army with her lover but she cannot. Ultimately, she chooses an extreme way to end her life; she is expressing her beliefs (not to accept the arranged marriage) by sacrificing her life. On the film’s cover image, Cuiqiao’s image is the main focus, with her devotion to the man and her country that she loves. According to the alternative interpretation offered, it can be posited that women are not
excluded from history, but are shown on screen to be participating in history but in a different mode of engagement. They are not in fact alienated and dependent.

Thus, accepting this new interpretation of women’s roles in both cinema and history, the following issue must now be addressed. If women are not alienated or dependant on screen, as Mizou (1991) argues, do they really have a voice in Hou’s films?

**Do women have a voice in history?** In *A City of Sadness*, even though the housewife, Kuan-mei, is used as the main storyteller, this does not necessarily mean women have a true voice in history. What is Hou’s motivation in his use of female narrators? It may be the case this narrative device is used by Hou purely to avoid attracting criticism for the opinions expressed therein, or that his use of a female narrator, a simple housewife, allows for errors in his historical description and understanding of history. Hou utilises Kuan-mei’s voice as a vehicle for expressing his ideas has been criticised by Mizou (1991).

In the discussion of whether women can enter history, Mizou (1991) draws on Julia Kristeva’s essay “Women’s Time,” in which Kristeva (1986) argues:

Female subjectivity is divided between cyclical, natural time (repetition, gestation, the biological clock) and monumental time (eternity, myths of resurrection, the cult of maternity). These modalities are set off against the time of linear history (pp. 190–193).

The idea of linear time and cyclical time is important in the discussion of micro/macro-history, as the development of time in micro-history seems to occur in a circular mode (based on repetition and reproduction), while the development of time in macro-history seems to occur in a linear mode, with a clear beginning; it can only move forward and cannot return to the start.
Similarly, Mizou states, “Kuan-mei’s femininity (a female quality under a patriarchal definition) and the contents of [her] diary are contradictory to the linear track of macro-history” (1991, pp. 135–140). Mizou thereby implies that women cannot really enter history. Expressing a different view, Emilie Yeh (2000) believes that circular time (women’s time) instead struggles against linear time (historical time). Through a perspective on female/male sound and writing, in the following section I discuss whether women can really have a voice in history.

**Can women really talk in history? Towards a perspective on sound and writing**

In *A City of Sadness*, Kuan-mei’s diary is not written in chronological order, as official history is. Hence, it does not follow the linear track of macro-history. As Kuan-mei’s account of history is based on retelling the Lin family’s tragedy, it does not provide an accurate account of official history but represents micro-history, which is subject to error and misinterpretation, as well as inconsistencies in chronology.

Mizou (1991) stated that the female characters in *A City of Sadness* do not have a voice because women choose to endure all suffering and be silent. If they speak, it is about the quotidian and is male-oriented, and thus female friendships rely on sharing about male topics. Mizou (1991) claims that “women only enter history as a tool to convey the men’s stories. Thus, they do not enter history but are merely vehicles for conveying men’s history” (pp. 137–139).

Emilie Yeh disagrees. Yeh (2000) considers personal life a valuable tool in the interpretation of history. She regards history as an “interlacing of numerous families” and hence feels that women have tried hard to enter history in *A City of Sadness*. She disagrees with Mizou’s (1991) claim that female voices are eliminated when she addresses how Hou “uses feminine writing and voice to fight against the oppression of external macro-history”
(Yeh, 2000, pp. 192–193). She believes that Kuan-mei effectively transcribes micro-history through her letters and a diary, and that in the end her defiance represents women’s struggle to be included in history.

To advance this line of enquiry, I will provide a perspective by referring to the sound and image used in Hou’s films, as well as reviewing the voiceover and written texts of both the women and men in the film.

**Female sound.** Mizou (1991) states that female “noise elimination” can be observed at several points throughout *A City of Sadness*. When Wen-liang returns from prison, he is seriously injured. His wife is terrified and screams hysterically. Wen-xiong is so agitated that he commands her to “shut up” and call the doctor. Later, in a scene in which a group of women are knitting, A-xue wants to tell Kuan-mei what happened in the Incident, but she is scolded by her mother. At the end of the film, a woman wants to comment on someone’s absence at the table, but she is told to be quiet. These instances of silencing women illustrate women’s status at that time: women were not allowed to express their feelings freely in public (Mizou, 1991, pp. 136–137).

Female voiceover has been used throughout *A City of Sadness* to great effect, as discussed by Nornes and Yeh (1994):

The interior feminine voice is positioned at several points in the narrative to create irony that evokes a political awareness of the brutality of the Nationalist regime. The quiet ending of the film leaves us with a family deeply wounded by politics. With the emotional reactions restricted due to the imperatives of their patriarchal role in family and society, the range of the male characters’ emotional reaction is limited. Thus, their frustration must be displaced onto illegitimate social (underworld) institutions such as gambling, prostitution, and fighting. This is the only outlet for relief. Women, on the other hand, prove more capable at coping with the changes since they are excluded from the centre of the political arena. However, their marginal position does not prevent them from being affected by the bloody political transition. Although most female characters in the film are deprived of a public speaking voice, their reaction to atrocity is still channelled through their “feminine” voice: usually hysterical screaming or weeping, gender codes kept strictly off-limits to Hou’s male characters.
Nornes and Yeh (1994) maintain that as a result Hou’s use of female voiceover is ironic in comparison to the male voiceovers used, such as the broadcast of the surrender of the Emperor Hirohito and the brutality of the Nationalist regime. Thus, while the voice of macro-history is male, the face of the speaker is not shown (Nornes & Yeh, 1994).

A contrast between male and female voiceovers is evident at the beginning of the film, when the murmuring of the Japanese emperor can be heard over the radio to announce his surrender to the Chinese government. At the same time, the screaming of Wen-xiong’s second wife can be heard as she gives birth to a son (Lin Guang-ming). Hou uses the Lin family’s newborn to represent a new era for the Taiwanese people, filled with hope and optimism. In Chinese culture, the selection of a child’s name by the parents is almost always a reflection of their expectations; hence the given name Guang-ming, which means “bright,” reflects their hopes for a happy future.

Following this scene, the title *A City of Sadness* appears onscreen and the musical prelude begins. Hou insinuates that the KMT’s takeover will not be as bright and glorious as anticipated by the use of the nearly-broken lamp in the beginning and at the end of the film. The background sound then transitions to Wen-xiong’s complaint about a blackout, before light returns to the screen. Onscreen, the caption reads, “On August 15, 1945, the Japanese Emperor announces his unconditional surrender. The 51-year colonisation by Japan has ended.” Using this scene, Hou Hsiao-hsien compares the macro-history, the transitional period of Taiwan, with the micro-history, the birth of Lin Wen-xiong’s son through his skilful overlapping of the male and female voiceovers (Yeh, 2000, p. 193).

The second scene conveys irony through female sound in the second daughter’s weeping, as described by Nornes and Yeh (1994):

Hou never discloses the name of the wife of the third son, Wen-liang. She expresses her frustration and traumatic feelings on two occasions when her life is damaged by the massive, outside forces of history. The first one occurs when the military police rush
into the house, attempting to arrest Wen-liang. It seems that a beating takes place in the off-screen spaces, but the wife’s hysterical screaming and its sound communicates the brutality with more visceral power than any on-screen violence could muster. Another example comes with Wen-liang’s homecoming after being released from the prison. Upon arriving at the house, he passes out as a result of the cruelty he experienced during imprisonment. Seeing him in such a terrible condition, the wife wails, calling his name in order to wake him. At the time same she reacts hysterically to her husband’s wounds, expressing the deep shock of her emotions.

Here, the sound of a female weeping is used to emphasise the brutality of the Nationalist regime from 1947 to 1949, which has caused the tragedy in the Lin family. Another example of the potential power of the female voice is when Wen-qing, after being released from prison, visits the family of a friend who was secretly executed in prison. This powerful scene is used to communicate the death of innocent victims. We are shown a will written in blood by an executed criminal for his son: “You should live with dignity. Your father is innocent.” This is a very emotional moment, which best represents “the sadness” in A City of Sadness. Hou continues to maintain that innocent people were dying, and fear was rising during this transitional period (Yeh, 2000, p. 201). The final example of use of the female voiceover satirises the brutality of the Nationalist regime, in a scene in which Chen Yi announces in a broadcast the financial settlement for victims of the February 28 Incident, followed by Kuan-mei’s writing in her diary about how many people were killed in Taipei: “Everyone is afraid that one war has just finished, will another soon begin?” Her writing is positioned to be prior to and to contradict Chen Yi’s pedagogical statement.

**The male voice.** If the female voice represents an accusation against the brutal macro-history, what does the male voice stand for? The contrast may be illuminating.

In *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman (1988, as cited in Yeh, 2000, p. 192) suggested the “female voice is aligned with interiority, confinement and self-presence, while the male voice-over is culturally and cinematically accepted as a synonym of direct, authoritative speech.” Further, Nornes and Yeh (1994) observe:
The male voice is perceived as the source of knowledge and the origin of the text. However, while it is true that the male voice is used to address historical facts, the manner in which it is placed in the context of the images creates a historical tension between the pedagogical and the personal.

In *A City of Sadness*, the male voices are connected to the most powerful historical figures—the Japanese Emperor and Chiang Kai-shek’s Governor Chen Yi—who are invisible rulers. The simultaneous visual absence and aural omnipresence of these powerful, patriarchal figures elicit a subtle yet powerful critique of colonial rule (Nornes & Yeh, 1994). For example, we never see the Nationalist soldiers’ faces; we only hear them on the radio, in prison, and outside the doors executing people in the darkness. This compositional style and use of sound conveys the invisible terror inflicted upon the characters.

**A comparison of A City of Sadness with Zhang Yimou’s Raise the Red Lantern.**

The use of framing, composition and sound to convey invisible terror in *A City of Sadness* is very similar to the techniques used in Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). In *Raise the Red Lantern*, we rarely see the face of the master but we often hear, feel, and fear his existence. *A City of Sadness* and *Raise the Red Lantern* are both political films that centre on a massacre. Although both films highlight political events, they each indirectly reference the incidents. *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) refers to the Tiananmen Square massacre, while *A City of Sadness* refers to the February 28 Incident. *Raise the Red Lantern* was produced in Mainland China following the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. In the film, Songlian (played by Gong Li), the female protagonist, is married into a new family and becomes a concubine. In this new family, there exist hierarchy, patriarchy and jealousy, which represent government corruption and hierarchy.

In the film, it is the master’s tradition to light lanterns outside the room of the wife he intends to join for that night. Since Songlian is new to the family, it is expected that the master will devote most of his time to her. However, during their first night together, the
master is called away to attend to his third wife, who complains of an ailment. From that
night, Songlian realises that she needs to resort to deceit and manipulation to retain her
husband’s interest. Moreover, while she does not necessarily appreciate his attentions, she
realises that her status in the household is directly proportional to how highly she is favoured.
As the film progresses, Songlian witnesses the execution of the third wife as a result of her
adultery with a family doctor. Songlian goes insane after the incident: lost in a maze, she
continues walking around the mansion in school uniform.

Zhang Yimou intends this film as a parable symbolising the corruption of modern
Chinese society. Songlian can be interpreted as the individual citizen, the master is the
government, and the customs of the house are the laws of the country; it is an archaic system
that rewards those who comply with the rules and destroys those who violate them.
Furthermore, Songlian is dressed in school uniform, aptly representing the students’ feeble
fighting power against authority, namely the Chinese government. When Songlian witnesses
the atrocity of the execution, the master instructs her, “You did not see anything,” just as the
Chinese government advocated following the Tiananmen Square massacre. In A City of
Sadness, similarly, it is claimed by the government that the entire Incident did not happen
(Berardinelli, 1996). Compared with Hou’s A City of Sadness, Raise the Red Lantern is more
circumspect in its political narrative. Zhang does not make any specific references to the
Tiananmen Square massacre, only subtly suggesting the connection through Songlian and the
master. By contrast, Hou is more direct in his portrayal of the Incident, as the film begins
with political images, immediately directing the viewer to the February 28 Incident, and the
events are continually narrated throughout the film via radio reports.

This comparison between Hou’s film and Zhang Yimou’s seminal Raise the Red
Lantern (1991) shows the means by which both films exploit national concerns in their self-
representation to an international market. I argue that a distinctive characteristic of Hou’s
film is that it cleverly uses the camera lens to protest against the government, while
simultaneously attempting to attract international critical attention to Taiwanese political
concerns. Zhang and Hou both have presented moving images to criticise their governments
indirectly. Ironically, the politically reserved *Raise the Red Lantern* received a bigger
international audience than the politically direct *A City of Sadness*, as the complexity of the
political events can be difficult for a foreign audience to grasp.

Returning to the relationship between the male-voice and macro-history, Yeh (2000)
explains further:

> In *A City of Sadness*, the male voice is clearly the tool for linear history. It is seen
> through the Emperor’s broadcast, Mandarin teachings in hospital, and Chen Yi’s
> speech, all filled with obvious linear chronology. It represents the Japanese surrender
> in 1945 ➔ KMT government’s restoration of Taiwan ➔ February 28 Incident in 1947 (p. 199).

As Yeh suggests, Hou uses males to illustrate official micro-history because he regards them
as the dominant power in his film. Throughout the film, we observe the symbols of male
dominance, as described earlier, from the Japanese Emperor, to the Mandarin teachings in
hospital, and to Chen Yi later. Further evidence of male dominance and power is offered
through the soldiers’ voices in prison and in the mountains, the discussion of politics on the
tatami mats, the intellectual discussion between Wen-qing and Kuan-rong, the multiple
language discussion about how to save Wen-liang, which takes place between Wen-xiong,
Ah-jia and the Shanghainese gangsters, and the discussion of business between Ah-jia and
Monkey outside the brothel. Innocent people are imprisoned, some are dying, and fear is
rising – these are notions echoed throughout the film. When the story moves on to the prison,
where soldiers are vacating their cells, to evoke an atmosphere of fear, we hear the cruel male
voiceover. When the sound of gunfire is heard, we realise that people are being executed. The

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40 My translation.
lens cleverly zooms in on Wen-qing’s face to draw a contrast, suggesting the innocence of the dead. Wen-qing is the next to be called from his cell. The lens moves to focus on the apathetic soldiers’ backs and the dark hallway. To maintain an atmosphere of fear, the audience hears the sound of the soldiers’ footsteps. Time and time again, male voices are shown to represent male dominance, control, manipulative authority and command. The dominance of the male voice is reinforced by the use of the camera. Males are the dominant power in A City of Sadness and in Hou’s view rightfully deserve to convey macro-history.

Nornes and Yeh (1994) observe:

[In A City of Sadness,] the performative indicates the representation of personal memory and individual experience against the political backdrop diegeticised in three discursive texts: sound, writing, and photography...these three discursive textualities provide an alternative approach to history as well as an indirect, mediated, and troped contestation with the official writing of the history of Taiwan.

This quote indicates that the three discursive texts – sound, writing, and photography – represent the primary approach to the representation of history in Hou’s film. Even though the personal memories and individual experiences are indirect and differ from the official macro-history, the collective memory of personal stories can make a contribution to macro-history in another way.

Kuan-mei’s diary parallels the political dimension of the February 28 Incident. As a nurse who works in the hospital, Kuan-mei is quite indifferent to politics. Kuan-mei represents that proportion of the population that is indifferent to politics. Intriguingly, in A City of Sadness, Kuan-mei’s diary and voiceover have been utilised to retell the Lin family’s story, which also implies Taiwan’s tragic fate from 1945 to 1949 throughout the film. Despite all the chaos in this world, Kuan-mei remains oblivious to it all. In A City of Sadness, Hou implies that the men’s lives are sacrificed while the women and children live to retell history. Therefore, it is important to analyse Kuan-mei’s diary, where women are the storytellers.
Female writing in relation to micro-history. Yeh (2000) notes that Hou’s audience should keep an eye on the micro-history shown in the film, which is not as simple as it appears:

*A City of Sadness* is a film with much limitation, and must be analysed through emphasis on the dialectics of image and sound, also focusing on those who are excluded in history, those victims who do not have a voice (such as female, innocent victims), and the objects carrying historical memory ... only when you analyse the lead actress, Kuan-mei and the monologue in her diary, the deaf-mute lead actor, Wen-qing and his photograph, can you further define the meaning of *A City of Sadness* in Taiwan’s history (p. 199).

Thus, Yeh suggests, to further understand history, it is important to analyse Kuan-mei’s entries as well as the voice of the silent, innocent victims. Therefore, in Yeh’s view, women have tried hard to enter history through the use of female writing and narration. In this way, Kuan-mei is a vehicle for the innocent victims to have a voice in history.

The telling of micro-history is also evident in Kuan-mei’s diary and the knitting scene. Kuan-mei sits knitting with her sisters-in-law and niece, A-xue, describing the fear of the people following the February 28 Incident. Micro-history is once again observed, as we witness the people’s struggles in life and their continuation of daily routines. Throughout the film Kuan-mei is writing and recording micro-history. She writes to her niece about the Incident and writes in her diary, recounting the death and misfortunes of the Lin family. In her article, “A Deaf-Mute Photographer,” Liao Ping-hui (1991) states, “Hou has created the character of Kuan-mei, the hospital nurse, to suggest that she has the ability to heal. Hence through her documentation she can put the past behind her” (p. 134). The audience is able to visualise life, death, hardships and survival as a circle of life.

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41 My translation.
42 ibid.
Through the use of women, Hou thus portrays a circular history that is different from linear history (official history). In Hou’s film, women seem to be able to participate in micro-history, but are excluded from macro-history. As described previously, through the use of female voices, women communicate in micro-history. In *A City of Sadness*, Kuan-mei’s diary constitutes a counter-narration because she is the only one who survives, visualises, and describes in words what is going on from 1945 to 1949. While what she writes is from her narrow point of view, which is the quotidian, that does not mean that those details in daily life cannot constitute a piece of macro-history, because macro-history is accumulated from numerous micro-histories. What Hou is doing is giving the audience a magnifying glass by which to meticulously visualise the tragedy in the Lin family throughout this period, and hence he is encouraging viewers to re-evaluate what is real in macro-history. When Wen-qing uses a magnifying glass to help him to make up the photographs he is editing and developing, it parallels Hou’s use of the film to heal the forgotten historical wound. For the victims’ families, this film might have healing effects. Hou reopens and relocates the discussion of the February 28 Incident from the perspective of a personalised history.

The film urges audiences to re-write history on the basis of their own families’ and relatives’ experiences. Mizou (1991) does not recognise the lead actress Kuan-mei’s devotion to be a nurse in order to help people after the Incident, which means Mizou ignores Kuan-mei’s effort to enter history. However, Yeh (2000) disagrees with Mizou, as she focuses on the argument that micro-history struggles against macro-history. I would go further, to argue the possibility of the co-existence of micro-history and macro-history.

**The implications through the shot of daily objects in *A City of Sadness***

According to Noël Burch (1979), Ozu tends to shoot the Japanese quotidian like everyday gestures or everyday objects to express the Zen spirit (which stems from *cha-no-yu*
[the tea ceremony]) of ‘Japaneseness,’ which shows the fine appreciation by both characters and camera (pp. 183–184). Burch (1979) goes on to state, “Many famous accounts of such ‘ceremonies’ read like an Ozu script, replete with pillow-shots and seamless ellipses” (pp. 183–184), implying that the camera sometimes focuses on one object that has a deep meaning. This can be seen in Ozu’s famous film *Banshun* (1949), which is about a father and a daughter’s relationship that is more than paternal love. Therefore, after attending the daughter’s wedding and going home, the father is shaving an apple and sitting at a table. The camera focuses on the peeling of an apple. When the apple skin drops on the ground, the father bursts into tears. This image reflects the lonely widowed father’s loss of the daughter’s love after her marriage.

This elliptical style of reference using quotidian images and everyday objects can also be seen in Hou’s films. In the beginning of *A City of Sadness*, Lin Wen-xiong’s wife is in labour and we hear the woman’s groaning while giving birth to a baby much more loudly than the Japanese Emperor’s announcement of surrender on the radio. This scene can be read as the effort of women “making a voice” in post-WWII history. There is also a blackout until the birth of Lin’s son. By contrast, the final scene shows the flickering of the lamp, suggesting the hope for a “bright” future could be as uncertain as the lamp’s flickering. A caption appears: “In 1949, Mainland China has changed political domination. The Nationalists have retreated to Taiwan and set Taipei up as a temporary capital city.” The flickering of the lamp implies the uncertain future for Taiwan after the Nationalists’ domination. Before the final scene is the “last supper,” where the remaining members of the Lin family have dinner together. Interestingly, the only remaining male characters are the old grandfather, the third son (who is insane), and Lin Guang-ming. Meanwhile, the women of the family are busy preparing food in the kitchen. We do not see their faces. Here the
patriarchal tradition of an old Taiwanese family is revealed: men are the boss and women should serve them well.

The elliptic style makes Hou’s film difficult to watch, which is an issue that may have contributed to the lack of appeal of the film to foreign audiences. Much like Ozu’s films, Hou’s film shows the tradition and quotidian of Taiwaneseness, which foreigners may find difficult to understand.

The photographic truth in Hou’s film makes this fictional story convincing

Even though *A City of Sadness* is fictional, it is still convincing as a historical film through the use of setting and costumes. First, I will compare two images, below. Figure 2.3 is the family photo of my grandparents, my father and my aunt. Figure 2.4 is a snapshot of Wen-qing’s family before his execution.

The similarities are clear. Their hairstyles are similar, as is clothing. Also, the photographs’ composition is similar. Hou uses a familiar photographic connection from that time to frame his image. Hou’s use of his family story to illustrate Taiwan’s situation during that time is realistic; respecting the familiar modes of representing history is one way of ensuring the authenticity of the story.
The co-existence of *yin* and *yang* in micro-history and macro-history

I have argued it is possible for micro-history and macro-history to co-exist. This idea comes from a chart from the historian Ray Huang’s article “Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao.” Huang (2000) notes that:

In the diagram below, the solid portion of the curve is my idea of the configuration of world history. It is made of an infinite number of short thrusts of human effort. For clarity, only three large segments are presented. (Basically this is also the concept of macro-history.) Called *karma* or predestination, the compulsion of the past is such that our path runs in a continuous circuit. What freedom of choice we are entitled to starts from where we stand, in the footsteps left by our forefathers. The arrows pointing skyward suggest our idealistic tendencies. Moral power has to be a vital force, since the mass movement represented by the drive of each arrowhead, involving self-sacrifice of an enormous magnitude, cannot be launched without some sense of universal justice, genuine or assumed. But to counter it, there is always a centrifugal pull. Should we call it original sin, or, as Chinese philosophers refer to it, “human desire”? World history evolves out of the inter-reaction of the *yin* and the *yang* (pp. 264–265).

![Diagram 2.5](image)

**Diagram 2.5** The solid portion of the curve is the configuration of world history by Ray Huang (2000, p. 264).

Using Ray Huang’s idea of *yin* and *yang* in the description of history, I use the diagram overleaf to describe the motif of Hou’s *A City of Sadness*. 
Diagram 2.6: This represents yin (the black part inside of the circle) and yang (the white part inside of the circle); yin also represents female and yang also represents male in Chinese philosophy.

A City of Sadness, superficially, is a woman’s story located in yin (the left side of the circle). However, if we interpret this film according to the official history in yang (the right side of the circle), all of history is complete as a circle, as in the above diagram. In this way, yin and yang cannot survive alone and require balance in order to co-exist. This also explains Hou’s intention of using a story about women to explain history. If we understand the two sides of history in this way, the debate about whether women can enter history is redundant, as women are history.

I have identified that micro-history and macro-history co-exist, as demonstrated by the opening scene, where we hear both the groaning of Lin Wen-xing’s wife giving birth and the surrender of the Japanese Emperor. Kuan-mei’s writing should be valued as equally important as Wen-qing’s photography, as both are documenting history. At the end of the film, we see the remaining family members of the Lin family: the grandfather, the grandson, the insane Wen-liang, and some women. Following the loss of some members of the Lin family, Hou again implies that women are as important as men in witnessing history. Therefore, micro-history and macro-history should be able to co-exist as yin and yang do (Huang, 2000, p. 265). This explains Hou’s use of the Lin family’s story to illustrate not only the sadness of “the family” or “the city,” but also the sadness of “Taiwan.”
My reading of Hou’s films demonstrates that women are not excluded from history, as Mizou argued (1991). Women have not only struggled to “enter” history, as Emilie Yeh (2000) has argued, but they have already “been” in history. History is a combination of micro-history and macro-history, which cannot exist independently. This framework is a good basis for Hou to convey important issues in Taiwan through his cinematic texts, utilising a female character as the main narrator – usually male characters are the narrator in Taiwanese films – and thereby breaking new ground. The use of women to tell a political history is developed further in Hou’s later film, *Good Men, Good Women*, which will be discussed in Chapter Three.
Chapter Three:
How Does Hou Hsiao-hsien Engage Popular Memory? Nationalism, Language and
Family Story in Good Men, Good Women

Memory itself is an internal rumour (Santayana, 1905).\(^{43}\)

Memory is a complicated thing, a relative to truth, but not its twin (Kingsolver, n.d.).\(^{44}\)

The impact of A City of Sadness was so strong that it overshadowed the significance of the other two films in Hou’s national trilogy, namely The Puppetmaster and Good Men, Good Women. The Puppetmaster spans Li Tian-lu’s life between the late Qing Dynasty and the period of Japanese colonisation. The film ends in the takeover by the Nationalists in 1945. Good Men, Good Women highlights the saga of national heroes and how they suffered during the White Terror. The White Terror refers to the suppression of political dissent and public discussion of the massacre. In the decades following the February 28 Incident, many thousands of Taiwanese were imprisoned or executed for their real or perceived opposition to the Kuomintang government, leaving many native Taiwanese with a deep-seated bitterness towards the Mainlanders. If the February 28 Incident triggered hatred and deepened the misunderstanding between local Taiwanese and Taiwanese mainlanders, the White Terror was the direct effect of the Incident that had caused the antagonism between the two groups.

This chapter engages with popular memory in Good Men, Good Women, in order to explain the history of Taiwan after WWII. The chapter deals with the themes of nationalism,
language and family dealt with in the film. First, I will discuss the patriotism of the Taiwanese during the Sino-Japanese War. In these turbulent times, there was a group of Taiwanese that refused to support Japan in the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and instead went to Mainland China to help the Chinese fight the Japanese, in a demonstration of their patriotism. In the film, the phenomenon of a certain group of people’s patriotism in Taiwan is very well explicated. But the language and cultural barriers between Taiwan and China made it difficult to realise their “patriotism”.45

Synopsis of Good Men, Good Women

*Good Men, Good Women* focuses on the reconstruction of terror and memories. The terror of remembering the past is represented clearly in the lead actress Liang Jing’s monologue. *Good Men, Good Women* highlights two different eras in Taiwan: the political movement in the 1950s and the pop culture in the 1990s. Liang Jing, who plays an actress in *Good Men, Good Women*, details the saga of her character Jiang Bi-yu and her husband, Zhong Hao-dong, who refuses to support the Japanese army and so volunteers to join the army in China to fight against the Japanese. They become national heroes in the Sino-Japanese War during the 1940s, after returning to Taiwan. Liang takes her performance very seriously and even feels the spirit of Jiang inside her body. This parallel of one modern and one traditional woman’s stories also reflects the cultural and political transformation of Taiwan because their stories cover the social and cultural phenomena of the 1950s and 1990s.

In *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou highlights the bitterness of the fate of the Taiwanese, being caught between China and Japan and, in the end, distrusted or disowned by both sides. This quandary is evident in the Taiwanese volunteers being investigated in Mainland China in

45 During the Japanese colonisation period, Taiwanese spoke Hokkien and Japanese but not Mandarin. So, when a group of Taiwanese went to China during the Sino-Japanese War to support China, they were investigated by the Chinese soldiers in Mandarin, which required an interpreter. This situation showed that Taiwanese realised that the idea of Chinese same-culture-same-language in their motherland, China, might be an illusion. See (Wu, 2000, p. 313).
the Sino-Japanese War, which explains where the Taiwanese came from and who they were after the transfer of sovereignty from the Japanese to the Nationalists.

Memory in Hou’s trilogy

The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. Rather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity (Huyssen, 1995, p. 3).

To illustrate the significance of memory in Hou’s films, I will use a few examples. The film The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry, 2004) was based on the poem Eloisa to Abelard:

How happy is the blameless vestal’s lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!
Each pray’r accepted, and each wish resign’d;
Labour and rest, that equal periods keep;
‘Obedient slumbers that can wake and weep;’
Desires compos’d, affections ever ev’n…(Pope, 1717).46

The theme of the film is that if memory is traumatic, and there is a procedure that can help you to remove the bad memories, would you be willing to go? At first, people found it was worth undergoing the procedure. However, eventually the realisation emerges that if we keep deleting all bad memories, we will never learn from our mistakes and we will keep making the same mistakes over and over again. There is a parallel between this theme and Liang Jing’s story, and the representation of history.

Representations of history in cinema can help us to “remember” what happened, even though the memory may be traumatic. However, if history is like a traumatic

46 This is a quote from the poem Eloisa to Abelard written by Alexander Pope. It was published in 1717. Lines 207–210 were spoken in the film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, which borrowed line 209 as its title. Retrieved 25 April, 2011, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eloisa_to_Abelard.
memory, the best way to heal it is not to hide it, but to acknowledge it and talk about it; otherwise, the wound may never heal. The longer people tend to hide or ignore the pain, the longer they have to “trace back” to heal it. By shooting his Taiwan trilogy just after the lifting of martial law, Hou Hsiao-hsien has provided people with a “discussion board.” It is not difficult to understand his intention to reconstruct people’s memory of the political events; in A City of Sadness, Hou chooses a housewife, Kuan-mei, to represent the February 28 Incident indirectly. Some criticise this technique as a misinterpretation of history, but Hou claims that his job is to make the film, and he does not care much about such criticism (Mizou & Liang, 1991). In The Puppetmaster, Hou uses an 80-year-old puppet master, Li Tian-lu, to “narrate” Li’s life, which spanned between 1895 and 1945. The film ends when the Nationalists take over Taiwan. In Good Men, Good Women, which is a film within a film, Hou utilises actress Liang Jing to portray a character, Jiang Bi-yu, whose life is influenced by the political witch hunt, or the White Terror, as her husband was executed by the KMT authorities. As such, Good Men Good Women completes the Taiwanese trilogy in the twentieth century.

Hou’s “play” with memory in Good Men, Good Women. “Play” here has multiple meanings; one refers to a script, the other refers to a trick. From the beginning to the end of Good Men Good Women, the viewer learns the stories of Liang Jing and Jiang Bi-yu through Liang’s narration. Throughout the film, the viewer learns about Taiwan’s history, gaining an insight not only into the sadness of the characters’ lives but also the sadness of the nation. Although the remaking of history may differ from the actual events, in the 1990s Hou was brave enough to incorporate different voices and criticism into his artwork regarding Taiwan’s macro-history. In addition, he was also aware that the reinterpretation of history is never completely accurate, and as such, he uses a “film within a film” to remind the spectators that they are watching a “film” and not a “documentary.” This is a necessary
strategy to avoid criticism and the strict film censorship criteria.

In *Good Men, Good Women*, we see a group of young Taiwanese volunteers (in the Sino-Japanese War) walking in a rural area in Guangdong Province in China, singing “Why Don’t We Sing? (我們為什麼不歌唱?)” The images are in black and white. At the end, we again see these images of those volunteers walking forward, this time in colour, accompanied by Liang’s voiceover: “It is a pity that Jiang Bi-yu died one day before the shooting of *Good Men, Good Women*, and that she was not able to watch a film about her life when she was alive.” The final caption says: *This film is for Mrs. Zhong Hao-dong, Mrs. Jiang Bi-yu and political victims in the 1950s.* This is a reminder that it is not just a film about two women, but a film made to honour the memory of political victims of the 1950s. The ending raises the question of whether what is shown in the film is just “a film of Mrs. Jiang Bi-yu” or more like a national allegory of all Taiwanese people who suffered during the White Terror, as will be discussed later in this chapter. It also opens a dialogue for viewers, because events in the film have deeper meanings than they appear to. A similar example can be found in *A City of Sadness*. Even though it is a story about a family’s experience of the February 28 Incident, at the end of the credits, it says, “In December, 1949, China was taken over by the Communist party so the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan,” but it does not go on to explicitly state the real political significance. Hou conveys his political agenda in his films through a combination of fictional and true stories.

**The patriotism of Taiwanese ideology during the Sino-Japanese War**

The 1940s were a difficult time for Taiwan, as Japan and China were at war. In response to Japanese colonisation, a group of Taiwanese decided to join China in its fight against the Japanese in China. After China won the war in 1945, they returned to Taiwan with honour and as national heroes. Those people had therefore reached a high position in society,
equal to that of a principal in a high school or an announcer in a radio station. With the retreat of Chiang Kai-shek, however, their patriotism was distorted and they were seen as Chinese Communist collaborators. Some of them were killed. During that period, there were many such political victims, and so it became known as the White Terror. With the making of *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou skilfully represents a political victim’s story as “a film within a film,” to make the audience reflect on the question of patriotism. Hou poses two questions: what would happen if the political party in power were to change? And what are the colonised people’s reactions in terms of the macro-history? Hou wanted to depict the Taiwanese people’s dilemma and the bitter fate of being caught in between the Japanese and Chinese. While some Taiwanese wanted to escape the rule of Japan and to support China during the war, their patriotism was misunderstood and many were killed by the Chinese Nationalists later.

In *Good Men, Good Women*, Liang Jing, a film actress of the 1990s, plays the role of the national heroine, Jiang Bi-yu, in the 1950s. As a nurse at that time, Jiang went to China to help wounded Chinese soldiers in the Sino-Japanese War. The role of the nurse symbolises the comfort offered to the wounded and victims of World War II and conveys the sentiments of anti-war and peace. To this end, Hou uses the end credits to honour the political victims depicted in the film.47

**Language and cultural barriers between Taiwan and China.** Language can be used to suggest cultural differences, and this is done to good effect in *Good Men, Good Women*. During Japan’s 51 years of colonisation, not only the way the Taiwanese use their language, but also their culture and lifestyle, were strongly influenced by the Japanese. The ensuing bitterness about the period 1895–1950 confuses the issue of loyalty. First and

47 This is similar to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), which is not just about a French actress’ one night stand with a local Japanese man in Hiroshima, but also about the cruelty of war and the idea of peace.
foremost, how do we define nationality? What might Good Men, Good Women say about identity politics? In Good Men, Good Women, multiple languages are used, which underlines the cultural barriers. Jiang Bi-yu, her husband Zhong Hao-dong, and the other Taiwanese volunteers went to Guangdong Province to help the Chinese soldiers. They were investigated by Chinese officers regarding their real intentions, because they appeared to be Japanese collaborators. In the film, the questions were asked in Cantonese, which required an interpreter to translate them into Hokkien. The investigations created a feeling of alienation, even though China was Taiwan’s motherland. The language barrier made the Japan-colonised Taiwanese volunteers realise that their patriotic dream and belief in their “motherland” were shattered.

During the war, Jiang Bi-yu was due to give birth and needed someone to adopt her son. A relative in China was willing to help her and addressed her in the Hakka dialect. The usage of different languages in Good Men, Good Women foreshadows the cultural barriers that would arise later in Taiwan under Nationalist rule. After the war, Jiang and her husband returned to Taiwan as national heroes and reached high positions in their careers. Because of the climate of anti-communism, however, they were suspected by the Nationalists of being Chinese Communist collaborators. Eventually, Jiang’s husband was executed.

This sequence of events induces the viewer to consider the relationship between language and issues of ethnicity in self-definition. Good Men, Good Women raises the question of what defines a nation, and whether a nation should be defined merely by boundaries. It also makes the audience think about where people will end up if they sacrifice morality to nationalism, and suggests that identity politics are a minefield: if you become involved in them, you will be lucky to get out alive. Hou’s uses different languages in Taiwan and China to suggest the irony of Taiwanese patriotism; because of this language barrier, the
Taiwanese begin to realise that there is an invisible wall (cultural and language difference) between Taiwan and China, which is beyond their imagination.

During the 1970s, the KMT government made Mandarin compulsory in all the schools in Taiwan, which had political implications. The following is an example of my uncle’s diary when he was in the fifth grade in primary school in Taiwan in 1972.

Figure 3.1 My uncle’s diary in primary school in 1972 Taiwan.
Basically, my uncle wrote that his father had bought two bonsais of begonia. The begonia leaf reminded him of the map of China. During that time, the people of Mainland China were suffering under Communist rule, and he hoped one day they would be liberated from it. In the end, he wrote that the Taiwanese dialect: zero. According to my uncle, Mandarin was the only language that could be used in school. If any one used Hokkien or any other dialects in class, he or she would be punished and made to stand in front of everyone in the school and would also get fined (NT$ 5, which approximates AUD 20 cents) each time.

From the diary, we can see two interesting things. First, in 1972, China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and the KMT education in Taiwan profoundly influenced the idea of “save our own people in China,” as seen in my uncle’s diary. As an 11-year-old school student, even the bonsais remind him of the map of the motherland, China, and induce him to think about saving people in China; the KMT cultural hegemony influenced the people of Taiwan. Second, it is significant that, at the end of the diary, the student has to write that there is no Taiwanese dialect, which underscores KMT’s policy of making Mandarin Taiwan’s official language. In 1972 Taiwan, the Taiwanese dialect was banned by the KMT for political purposes, compared with 1940s Taiwan, when people could speak both Japanese and Taiwanese most of the time. My paternal grandfather’s Japanese transcript on the cover of the family album presents a strong contrast to my uncle’s diary, demonstrating that the cultural hegemony left ordinary people with different impressions of the government of the day.
Figure 3.2 My paternal grandfather’s transcription of a Japanese poem, *Nostalgia*.

I believe my paternal grandfather had a strong nostalgia for the period when Japan ruled Taiwan, as evidenced by his writing a Japanese poem, *Nostalgia*, in the album. Unlike Hokkien, which was banned under KMT rule in the 1970s, Taiwanese were “encouraged” to speak Japanese during the Kominka movement. However, my grandparents’ nostalgia for colonial Japan may not be understood by today’s Japanese, as their history of colonising Taiwan and then being forced to relinquish Taiwan is not regarded as honourable. The isolation of local Taiwanese sentiments is similar to the feeling evoked in the investigation scene of Jiang Bi-yu and her other friends, in that their sense of belonging is suppressed, which shows the KMT’s insensitivity to local Taiwanese sentiments.

Returning to the issues of language and nationalism in *Good Men, Good Women*, Wu Jia-qi (2000) argues that the investigation scene in the film demonstrates the language barrier
between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese. When they are investigated, they cannot even understand the officer’s language and an interpreter is needed. “This manifests not only the language barrier but also the left-wing Taiwanese’s idea that the so-called same-language-and-same-race ‘China’ or the Chinese nation is just fantasy and fallacy” (Wu, 2000, p. 313).48 “Yet the left-wing Taiwanese desired to fight Japanese colonisation, autocracy, and the feudal system, rather than identifying themselves with Chinese culture or thinking of themselves as Chinese” (Wu, 2000, p. 313).49 This alienation between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese was a result of the Kominka movement. Even though the Kominka movement did not achieve its goal regarding the Taiwanese people, it did differentiate between the Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese.

The film also explores the politics of collaboration. Here, we face the question of how collaboration is defined. We must question whether we can call this an act of “collaboration” if a significant portion of the population goes along with it. And if political parties change, the issue becomes even more complex. How do we define a “traitor” and a “patriot” when everything depends on the ruling party? Nationality, after all, is not simply what is shown on a map or passport. What counts is how we see ourselves, which means that the “motherland” is what we hold within our minds.

The national heroes in Good Men, Good Women are intellectuals who are involved in politics. This raises the question of the role education plays in collaboration and resistance. Under Japan’s cultural hegemony, the Taiwanese were supposed to have been Japanised by the Kominka movement, the Japanisation movement during the Sino-Japanese War, but a number of Taiwanese retained their Chinese way of thinking and chose to resist the pressures of the coloniser. The controversy in Good Men, Good Women leads us to question the

48 My translation.
49 ibid.
definition of faithfulness, patriotism and loyalty. Does the fact that the Taiwanese of the 1940s shared an ethnic background with Mainland China require them to be patriotic to China, or should they identify with the Japanese government? Hou seeks to provide the answers to such vexed questions indirectly, as I will explore in the next section.

**Family stories vs. political history**

The reason I address my own family stories and political history is because *Good Men, Good Women* is composed of two women’s stories, taking place in the 1940s and in the 1990s. During those fifty years, Taiwan changed a great deal. In the stories of Jiang Bi-yu and Liang Jing, we feel the huge gap between them, much like the huge gap between Taiwan and China after fifty years of colonisation. In a way, my family stories are also concerned with political history and are worthy of close analysis.

I always remember my grandfather saying that before he was twenty years old, he was Japanese. This kind of nostalgia for Japanese colonisation might be difficult for his children to understand, as they grew up under the KMT rule. It might also be difficult for Japanese to understand, as the Japanese history of colonising Taiwan and leaving Taiwan after its surrender in WWII is condensed in Japanese history textbooks. My grandfather’s situation is similar to that of Jiang Bi-yu, as the complex sense of belonging is hard for Mainland Chinese to understand, as shown in *Good Men, Good Women*.

**The parallel of Liang Jing and the national heroine Jiang Bi-yu.** Hou depicts three parts of Jiang Bi-yu’s and Liang Jing’s lives in *Good Men, Good Women* in reverse order. First, we see Liang’s pop culture life in a 1990s urban city as an actress, followed by Liang’s memories of her dead lover in the 1980s, related to sub-cultural life, such as drug use and gangster brawling. Then we see Liang playing the role of Jiang as a patriot in the 1940s to 1950s. What is intriguing is that sometimes we see black and white when Liang plays the role of Jiang, and sometimes we see the image in colour. It seems Hou Hsiao-hsien is claiming
that if the image is shown in black and white, it means that person is the real Jiang. If the image is shown in colour, it means Liang is acting the role of Jiang.

Because the black and white images are reminiscent of looking at old photos, Hou’s change of the colours on screen confuses the audience. Thus, in the final shot of the film, we see Jiang crying by the bed with Zhong Hao-dong’s dead body lying on it. After a while, the image becomes colourful. If black and white suggests a documentary feel, then full colour implies that it is a drama and not real. This shows Hou wants to produce this invention through the use of colours in image similar to its function in photos.

50 Hou’s idea about the merging of reality and drama can also be observed in the Mandarin title of the second film in his national trilogy. The Mandarin title is Xi, Meng, Rensheng (戲夢人生), which means “drama, dream and life”.

The following pictures explain Liang Jing’s “three lives” in *Good Men, Good Women*.

Figure 3.3 Liang Jing is sad after getting the fax about her lost diary.

Figure 3.4 Film poster image for *Good Men, Good Women*.

Figure 3.5 Jiang Bi-yu grieving in prison, watching her husband being sent to court.
Liang Jing, as represented in the 1990s (Figures 3.3 and 3.4) also plays the role of the idealistic Jiang Bi-yu in the 1950s (Figure 3.5), while Figure 3.4 shows the film poster image for *Good Men, Good Women*. Interestingly, we see Liang (second to the right) with an uneasy facial expression to tell the audience that it is just a rehearsal and not “real” because it is like a bad shot/behind the scene of a film. Liang and Jiang both lose their husband/lover but they lead very different lives. Jiang remains single and pursues social justice for her husband for the rest of her life, whereas Liang has multiple partners in order to forget her lover, Ah Wei, who died in a gangster brawl. One scene presents Liang Jing’s love life with Ah Wei in the 1980s, when they are caressing each other in front of a mirror. The use of the reflection implies that it occurred in the past because they are not facing the audience but a mirror, as if she is self-reflecting on her degenerate past.

The parallel lives of Liang and Jiang also suggest the cultural and political transformations of Taiwan. During the 1950s, the KMT’s retreat to Taiwan created a regime that oppressed the local Taiwanese, creating many political victims during the period of the White Terror (as in Figure 3.5). Figure 3.5 shows Liang in black and white, which makes the audience believe that the woman is the real Jiang, as the use of black and white is reminiscent of a documentary. In the opening scene, Liang is terrified to read the contents of the white fax paper (about what she wrote in her diary) from an anonymous sender. What is guilt if a person is judged guilty by others but s/he never believes so? Or if s/he starts to have self-doubt if the majority thinks s/he is wrong? Liang’s diary, which was stolen, details the fact that her boyfriend was killed in a gangster fight during a business talk. Then, she received a settlement fee after her boyfriend’s death. To Liang, there is nothing wrong in accepting the settlement fee. However, the people involved with the profits might wonder why Liang received the settlement fee. So, they steal Liang’s diary and send it back to her to make her feel guilty. Similarly, Jiang’s husband was killed during the White Terror, which is an
unforgettable experience for Jiang. For Jiang, she and her husband did not do anything wrong. They were acting for the sake of patriotism. However, what if their patriotism was misunderstood by the KMT and they were seen as Chinese Communist collaborators? In the end, Jiang has to face the tragedy of losing her husband, and the accusation of being a KMT traitor is terrifying for her.\(^5\)

The lost diary represents lost history; the threatening fax reveals a dark history, just as the White Terror has been buried among the Taiwanese people and is seldom discussed, because fear is hidden and invisible in the face of Nationalist repression. On the one hand, Hou is ambitious in “rewriting” history as a filmmaker, yet he claims that this is “just” a film or the story of a woman whose diary is stolen to avoid criticism or to shift political focus.

**How do Jiang Bi-yu and Liang Jing deal with the loss of their beloved ones?**

Because of the strict censorship criteria and Taiwanese culture, in his historical films Hou has to convey his political concerns through women’s stories. I argue that Liang Jing’s romantic projection achieved by duplicating the feelings with the dead lover to make a reason for moving on with her new love life has a deeper meaning. What does loyalty mean? Aren’t we answerable to our consciences? This point will be further expanded on in a discussion of the female body as representative of a national territory and the new lovers as the new invaders. To whom should a woman (people) be faithful? Should she remember the previous dominator or forget about the past and listen to the new invader? As it is caressed, the body represents the consolation of memory and history. However, the feeling towards that torturous past comes back vividly and is waiting to find a way out. In *Good Men, Good Women*, the concept of traditional morality is challenged. Although Liang Jing has multiple partners after

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\(^5\) The actress, Yi Neng Jing, who performed as Jiang Bi-yu, once mentioned that her grandfather, Yang Yuan-ding, who used to be the vice mayor of Keelung city, was killed in the February 28 Incident. Because of the White Terror, her neighbors dared not talk to her family in the 1950s. Sharing the same kind of sentiment with Jiang, it makes Yi easier to perform the role of an actress performing Jiang in *Good Men, Good Women*.
her lover Ah Wei’s death, she is still loyal to him. She believes that, even if she has sexual pleasure with her new boyfriend on Ah Wei’s death anniversary, her mind is on him. If she is pregnant, the baby must be from Ah Wei’s reincarnation. Her body might not be loyal to Ah Wei, but her heart always belongs to him. As she is caressed, the fallen pieces of her soul are put together again. Liang’s open attitude to sex is very different from Jiang’s. Jiang remains a widow after her husband is executed in the political witch hunt.

*Good Men, Good Women* is an attempt to convey to the viewer the importance of being true to ourselves and to our feelings towards the past instead of hiding them. If a person can be true to him or herself, he or she is definitely a good person, no matter which generation he or she belongs to. This is Hou’s definition of good men and good women (Li, 1999, p. 76); being honest to yourself is better than being a hypocrite.

**The debate of goodness and badness.** In the 1950s, Jiang Bi-yu lost her husband in the White Terror; in the 1990s, Liang Jing lost her lover because of a gangster fight. They were both strong enough to survive; however, Liang Jing chose to go on with her life with another man. In Hou’s eyes, both Liang and Jiang are good women, as they are true to themselves. In different times, people do different things to make themselves feel life is meaningful. In Jiang’s time, a group of people sacrificed their youth to be patriotic. Unfortunately, their good intentions were misinterpreted by the Nationalist government. Hou says, “If you are true to yourself, you are a good person.” In Hou’s opinion, if the person is truthful to him/herself, this conforms to Hou’s definition of being good (Burdeau, 2000, p. 104). Taking his statement further, I pose the question: as a film maker, is Hou “truthful” to himself and attempting to be a “good” director according to his definition?
The image below shows the title of the film, *Good Men, Good Women*.

![Mandarin title of the film](image)

Figure 3.6 The Mandarin title of the film, 好男好女 (*Good Men, Good Women*).

In the beginning of *Good Men, Good Women*, intriguingly, the combination of the Chinese character, 好 (*hao*, meaning “good” in Mandarin), is written in reverse. There are a number of explanations for this reversal. First, it suggests that the definition of “good” is challenged in this film; perhaps what is bad in reality is perceived as good in the film, and vice versa. Secondly, the reversed 好 could be a reflection of 好 in a mirror, foreshadowing the importance of mirrors and reflections in *Good Men, Good Women*. Hou Hsiao-hsien’s inversion of “good” and “bad” may also refer to the ambiguity of what is perceived as true and false.

The audience may think Liang is actually a bad woman; she uses drugs, she accepts the settlement fee after her boyfriend’s death, she has multiple partners, and she even commits adultery with her sister’s husband. We cannot find any goodness in her. However, Hou has a different view of what it means to be good. In an interview with Emmanuel Burdeau (1999) he stated,

> Not everyone can choose his/her background in different times. Therefore, to me, there is no such thing as which time is better, more meaningful, or deeper. Basically, you still
can feel the life energy whether you are a man or woman individually in modern times. That is so-called *Good Men, Good Women* (p. 104).

Hou’s remark is vague; he wants to express the idea that “the personal life is as valuable as historical events, as long as you are making the most of your life, no matter which generation you belong to, the two generations in the film are both good men, good women” (cited in Wu, 2000, p. 137). Hou is again using ambiguity to explain his film, as the concept of true and false varies from one person to another. From the above-mentioned analysis, we can sense that *Good Men, Good Women* means more than it appears; it is a national allegory.

**National allegory**

National allegory in Taiwanese cinema is complex and should not be simplified. Rather, as Fredric Jamson opines, “allegory is a necessary element in Third World literature” (as cited in Kaplan, 1997, p. 275). Also, according to Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997),

Womanhood is often a trope for the nation, a national allegory, as in modern Chinese literature since the May 4th Movement, women have been portrayed as victims of feudal oppression. Their bodies have been the bearers of suffering and cruelty in a dehumanising society (pp. 20–21).

And what about the representation of womanhood in Taiwanese cinema? Before discussing the national allegory in women-centred cinema in Taiwan, I shall provide an account of the origins of women-centred cinema in Taiwan. According to Lin Wen-qi (1998):

Before the new wave cinema, KMT was using anti-communist films, healthy realism films, army pedagogical films, historical martial art films to intensify Taiwanese’s Chinese identity. However, after the lifting of the martial law, filmmakers attempted to deconstruct the macro-narration of the official construction of a nation. Therefore, [Japanese] colonisation experience became part of the material that offers a reference to Taiwanese new wave cinema...Filmmakers started to make films about the countryside of Taiwan or the urban city, Taipei, to seek a new identity as Taiwanese. Meanwhile, they started to deny or question the patriarchy [China] in the historical image [to get rid of the symbolic order] to express their idea of independence.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{52}\) My translation.
This may explain why Hou utilises women as main characters to portray historical stories and male roles tend to be weaker, minor roles. The idea of women as the main narrators in national allegory matures in *Good Men, Good Women*. Much like some Chinese literature where womanhood is often a trope for the nation, a national allegory after the May 4th Movement, *Good Men, Good Women* can also be seen as an example of national allegory due to its use of women’s independent stories narrating a nation (Lu, 1997, pp. 20–21).

Xavier (1999) suggests that:

> Seen from our present experience, allegories make evident their vocation to express the central role played by time in culture and in individual lives… they form a kind of “rhetoric of temporality,” when the impulse to memorise and identify with a previous moment (of history, of a personal life) ends up communicating the sense of crisis and separation from the irretrievable past (p. 348).

Xavier has argued that time in a different culture and in individual lives has an important place in allegory. The idea of different time and different personal experience can be seen clearly in *Good Men, Good Women*. This idea is also supported by Lin Wen-qi (1998):

There are three parts in *Good Men, Good Women*, which are connected by Liang Jing’s narration. The first part takes place in Liang’s residence. She (as an actress in this film) is waiting for the shooting of the film. Because of the fax, which has the contents of her lost diary three years ago, she is brought into two histories: One is about her personal history (the relationship with Ah Wei). The other is the national history she intends to enter through the film script. The first part is recorded in months and days, and the second part in years.53

This parallel of history is not simple because the modern Liang Jing is watching a Japanese film, *Bushun* (1949) to mimic Taiwanese women under Japanese colonisation (Jiang Bi-yu) for her film rehearsal. The image on TV also parallels the interweaving relationship of Japanese and Taiwanese history. Lin Wen-qi (1998) further maintains:

> In the whole film, Liang Jing’s narration about Taiwan’s history [Jiang Bi-yu’s story] is very detached. She does not have any passion and any influence from that story.

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53 ibid.
compared to the narration about her own diary. Liang Jing does not have any reflection about Jiang Bi-yu and her friends’ patriotic activity and does not identify herself as Chinese. In the same way, she does not identify herself as Taiwanese after knowing the unfair treatment of the Taiwanese in China [the unfriendly investigation by Mainland Chinese].

Lin’s point here is that in *Good Men, Good Women*, the disappearance of national identity as Taiwanese or Chinese becomes a phenomenon among the Taiwanese in the 1990s, mainly because Liang’s plain tone narration about history reveals her indifference to her own national identity. Nevertheless, I hold a different point of view that the detachment of plain tone narration draws a contrast with the brutality of macro-history images [this concept is the same as the alienation effect of Bertolt Brecht].

The alienation effect in Hou’s film is evident at the end of the film. Liang talked about her visiting Jiang-bi yu and Jiang said they resembled each other, and it is a pity that Jiang died before the shooting of *Good Men, Good Women* in China. The detached style of narration makes the audience aware that it is a film within a film. This final narration of Liang is similar to Brecht’s alienation effect in theatre. Huang Zuolin (1981) states:

> In the course of his [Brecht’s] work, Brecht actually adopted a number of techniques from the traditional theatre….This shifting of position facilitates the unfolding of the story, the delineation of character, and the elucidation of the author’s intention (p. 16).

Furthermore, the delineation of the storyline that moves back and forth makes the audience more focused. If Liang is passionate in describing how cruel the KMT government is during the White Terror, there is no difference between Hou’s films and classical Hollywood films. By doing this, Hou grants the audience a space to reflect not only on the micro-history of Liang Jing but also on the macro-history of Jiang Bi-yu. Therefore, contrary to Lin’s idea that

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54 My translation.

55 Bertolt Brecht is a famous German playwright in the 19th century. His alienation effect theory in drama is influenced by Chinese opera. His famous idea includes “the fourth wall concept”, that the actor/actress is aware of the existence of the audience in Chinese opera and the “quotation” acting to traditional Chinese storytelling techniques. See Marchett (1997, p. 74).
Good Men, Good Women shows a generation of loss and the disappearance of national identity not only in the 1990s but also in the 1950s, I maintain that Hou guides the audience to think about who the Taiwanese are and where they come from. The national allegory does not provide an answer but prompts the audience to think about it through the women’s stories.

If a woman’s story is used as a national allegory, it is necessary to analyse her narration. Hou uses women’s stories as national allegory not only to reflect on the past but also to think about the present. In doing so, Hou’s film provides a medium to connect the past with the present. To some audiences, this may also have pedagogical effects, such as suggesting the bitterness of the local Taiwanese is a shared experience, which should not be buried but expressed. Through the expression of the political trauma, we face the past and let the burden of history go.

Thus, not only time but also narration have played a very important part in allegory. The following section discusses female narration in films.

Female narration in Good Men, Good Women

What is female narration in relation to national allegorical films? Kaja Silverman (1985) points out in her essay “A Voice to Match: The Female Voice in Classical Cinema” that,

The disembodied voice-over, or frame narrator, occurs relatively infrequently in the classical cinema. It seems to be separated from the main diegesis by an absolute partition, and to invert the usual sound-image hierarchy: it seems to control the images, and to dictate their order from a superior position of knowledge (pp. 57–70).

Therefore, Silverman thinks that the usual sound-image hierarchy will be changed if the disembodied voiceover is involved. It is significant because the classical cinema [like Hollywood films] would prefer to use the embodied narrator [usually a male narrator]. Hou is thus challenging Silverman’s idea by using a female narrator in his historical film. Emilie Yeh (2000), referring to Silverman’s The Acoustic Mirror, explains:
The male voice-over most of the time co-exists with the image, giving the audience the feeling of the exteriority of power. Therefore males are usually the frame narrators. On the contrary, female voice-over can rarely detach from the restriction of interiority, so women have to show their stories in public and face the judgment or punishment in patriarchal society in the end (p. 192).

Silverman believes the narrator is usually the male, whose voiceover represents a kind of dominance in classical films. Even when a female voiceover is used in films, the female character usually awaits a kind of judgement from the audience in the end. Although Silverman’s selection of classical films is restricted, her observation of female narration is instructive: female narration in *Good Men, Good Women* should be examined as to whether women are like storytellers, sharing their private stories and waiting for the judgement of patriarchal society, or whether women can be the subject as male narrators are. In *Good Men, Good Women*, Liang Jing’s reading of her diary is cyclical and monumental because it details the political victims’ stories. From Yeh’s (2000) observation, women’s time is cyclical and relates to repetition, reproduction and eternity. The revealing of Jiang’s private life paves the way for Liang to “re-experience and join” history in the political cinema.

Moreover, it is important to have historical credible narration in cinema. Guido Fink (1982) states:

> a silently accepted convention seems to state that images and visualised actions…may omit something but never distort the truth…A curious balance or compensation rules that oral narration – conscious, subjective, deliberate – helps us to understand and rationalise events, but may be lying; narrated stories – that is, represented, shown events – may be partial, disturbing, incomplete, but never false (p. 24).

It is Fink’s belief that, in the ways readers receive and interpret film, narration may be interrupted and not complete, but it cannot be incorrect and the truth cannot be distorted.

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56 My translation.
Because Hou’s film is engaging with memories through a woman’s narration, Fink’s point should be taken into consideration when reading Hou’s films, as conveying truth in historical films is a basic responsibility of a filmmaker. Now, the question is whether Hou is using the ambiguity of popular memory to avoid responsibility for representing history accurately.

**Further analysis of the film.** Before I provide my analysis, let me first draw attention to June Yip’s comments on Taiwanese New Cinema. She states that:

> One of the chief objectives of 1980s Taiwanese New Cinema (Taiwan Xin Dianying), therefore, was to challenge the narrow view of Taiwan’s modern history institutionalised by civic education and official culture by describing the great diversity of experiences in contemporary Taiwanese life. Taiwanese New Cinema has contributed toward the definition of distinctly Taiwanese “nation” through its groundbreaking attempts to construct historical representation of the “Taiwan experience” (Yip, 1997, p. 140).

Even though *Good Men, Good Women* was made in the 1990s, Hou has carried on the spirit of Taiwanese New Cinema in his later films, such as his Taiwanese trilogy. However, I question whether the shared Taiwanese experience (popular memory) is credible in his films.

In Tessa Morris-Suzuki’s (2005) work on popular memory, she argues that the Japanese word for photography, *shashin* (写真), meaning “to write in truth,” is controversial. Morris-Suzuki further argues that photography can be problematic, as it can be staged and inauthentic. However, there are still some photos that can be truthful and valuable for revisiting history. She also believes that photography can show truth to a certain extent, even though truth is in the eye of the beholder (Morris-Suzuki, 2005, p. 118). Photography can also be controversial because it depends not only on how the photograph frames the image, but also on how the viewers see it. Morris-Suzuki’s conception in this regard is useful, as the complicated relationship between the image maker and the viewer cannot be easily explained in terms of whether the photo is a representation of truth or simply constructed. Taking Morris-Suzuki’s statement further, if photography can be controversial and mislead spectators,
so can cinema, as cinema is the accumulation of many images.

Morris-Suzuki provides some examples of how photos can be “staged” by the photographer. She also points out that the “close-up” of the photograph of Child with a Rice Ball, Accompanied by Adult, by Yamahata Yosuke in Nagasaki, August 10, 1945 during WWII, may have a different perspective for the audience trying to see the full view of the photo. She states:

Historical truthfulness is also a matter of the relationship between image and viewer: of the way in which we, as observers, approach photographs. Here, too, the relationship between empathy and interpretation matters. The intimate nature of photography makes the photo both an extraordinarily powerful medium of historical communication, and one whose use is fraught with problems (Morris-Suzuki, 2005, p. 118).

Later, however, Morris-Suzuki provides us an explanation of the function of shashin (photos), claiming that in the early nineteenth century, family albums represented social status but when photography became more prevalent, photography in media such as newspapers, magazines, or exhibitions became an “experience” for the public. The question is, how truthful can photography be? Morris-Suzuki concludes that truth is in the eye of the beholder. For example, a created image might reflect an audience’s true feeling, while a true reflection of an incident might “disgust” the viewer and prompt him or her to question the genuineness of the artwork. This means that the photographer has the power to control the emotional response of the audience if s/he does so intentionally.

It is true that Hou may want to be detached and objective as a director depicting the highly political February 28 Incident or the White Terror. The difficult part is that it is not a documentary but a feature film, which means that a grieving scene, for example, of the victim’s family might “touch” or “make a double pain” for the real victim’s family. In a way, that is what Hou has to realise as a responsible filmmaker. But again, in his day Hou faced the
obstacle that February 28 was a taboo in Taiwan: so how could he make February 28 vivid on screen forty years after the incident to let the Taiwanese know where we came from and who we are as Taiwanese? If such accounts cause pain and people cannot deal with it, or talk about it because of political concerns, how can they face the pain forty years after the trauma? There must be a balance between showing the truth and respecting the victim’s feelings. Hou attempts to strike a balance but I am not sure if he has struck the right one.

At the premiere of *A City of Sadness*, one February 28 political victim’s family member, Xu Shi-xiong, intended to give Hou a bouquet and claimed that he had walked out from the shadow of the incident after watching *A City of Sadness*. Xu also made accusations against the (KMT) government of Taiwan (Lin, 1991, p. 104). Hou’s reply was that his film is calm and it does not make any emotional accusation, meaning it is not about February 28. The film script writer also says that he does not want this film to be political and become a vehicle of fighting authority (Lin, 1991, p. 100). This seems ridiculous given the way Hou and his film promotion group used the name of the February 28 Incident to garner attention for the film overseas. If the film is not political, we have to wonder what Hou’s films are about.

Taking Morris-Suzuki’s theory that photography can be controversial, I question the use of film techniques in *Good Men, Good Women*. Hou’s film, as stated earlier, is based on the actress Yi Neng Jing’s personal life and Jiang Bi-yu’s autobiography. In a way, it is based on true stories. It is difficult to collect people’s memory and make the unbelievable believable in a dramatic fiction film because memory can change over time. Hou made this film in three parts; the national heroine Jiang Bi-yu’s anti-Japanese life (shot in black and white), the lead-actress Liang Jing’s life (shot in colour) and Liang Jing’s rehearsal of playing the role of Jiang Bi-yu (shot in colour). Hou has succeeded in “tricking” the audience, while using different colours to remind the audience which part is presented as history and which part is
presented as the present. By doing so, Hou can reasonably avoid taking responsibility for whether he is representing the truth, because it is not just a political film but a “political film within a feature film.” The structure of the film in three parts reflects doubts about the representation of popular memory, as Hou has changed the idea from “to see is to believe” to “to see is to doubt/reflect” as he leaves space for the audience to wonder, much like Gerard Betton (1990), who comments that Brecht’s play is intended not to lead the audience to the fantasy world but to make the audience aware of the problem in reality (p. 141). Thus, unlike making his films purely for entertainment like most commercial films, Hou normally does not give people a direct answer and the audience would have to think for themselves.

If Hou’s film has multiple meanings, we must observe Liang’s performance more carefully. Another foremost critic of *Good Men, Good Women* is Lesley Stern, who engages filmmakers and practices to initiate a complex theory on the value of gesture. She examines “the performance and migration of cinematic gesture” (Stern, 2008), using *Good Men, Good Women* as the case study. “Walter Benjamin identifies the camera as a technology of embodied knowing, as a machine for opening up the unconscious, and also wrote on the mimetic fault and gesture” (Stern, 2008, p. 196). Stern has analysed the cinematic gesture in Hou’s *Good Men, Good Women*, such as the vomiting image or ghost image of Liang Jing in the beginning of the film. To Stern (2008), it is about showing quotidian life rather than operatic gesture (p. 201). The quotidian is important here because Hou uses the everyday life of family history to reflect daily life in Taiwan. However, it remains unclear to me whether Stern means that Hou’s use of camera movement (long take) makes the image more real than in drama. In a way, the “real” feeling is set up by camera gestures like long take, and Hou has succeeded in making “the unreal real” and the “unbelievable believable” without using too many close-ups. Stern’s (2008) idea of the cinematic gesture is as follows:

If we were to focus on the repertoire of characters, we might begin by saying, “a bar
hostess converted into a revolutionary, a revolutionary converted into an actor.” But it is likely that it is a circuit of energy that passes through actants, gestures that mobilise bodies, affects that travel between bodies on the screen and bodies in the audience. The film works (like a dream “works”) as a patterning of doubles, mimicry, repetition, returns (p. 192).

I agree with Stern on this point that there is a strong energy that travels between bodies on screen and bodies in the audience. Through Liang’s performance, the audience can feel the transfer of the energy as if in a dream. To me, Hou’s *Good Men, Good Women* is a dream-like story as the memories are fragmentated. The actress Liang Jing has a sexual revolution. Meanwhile, acting as the national heroine, she is also experiencing a kind of social revolution. The slide between the actress, Liang Jing, and Jiang Bi-yu makes a simple political film complicated but fun to watch because it makes the audience enter the dream-like story. It is Stern’s belief that cinema has a close relationship to the dream and that dream is similar to memory. What about the relationship between memory and technology in Hou’s films? Arguably, both have played an important role in this film.

In the first scene in this modern space, Liang Jing’s memory is reproduced through the fax machine. Also, the popular memory regarding people in the 1950s, like Jiang Bi-yu, is represented with Yasujiro Ozu’s film *Banshun* (1949) showing on TV because Liang Jing has to see what people were like in the 1940s for her performance. In *Good Men, Good Women*, without the medium of technology, memory cannot be represented. The diary, fax machine, and television (the happy bike scene on TV is in stark contrast to the sad bike scene where the rider is about to paste the execution list on the announcement board) not only “arouse” and “pass back” Liang Jing’s past but also replace the remote past and reconstruct it.

Another critic of *Good Men, Good Women* is Wu Jia-qi (2000). Focusing on the relationship between technology and memory, Wu (2000) argues that what technology brings us is not only the possibility of looking into the future, but also the reproduction and
entangled relationship like a ghost in the past (pp. 303–305). Thus, according to Wu, technology has an impact on people who not only look back into the past but also look forward to the future.

Wu Jia-qi (2000) quotes a passage from Liang Jing’s diary, which we see in the film:

October 14th. Today is Ah Wei’s death anniversary. On the same date three years ago, Ah Wei died. When I had sex with Mr. L today, he didn’t have a condom on. He was amazed by my madness. I felt like I was having sex with the dead Ah Wei. If I am pregnant, the baby must come from Ah Wei’s reincarnation (p. 303).57

Wu (2000) writes that, in the beginning of Good Men, Good Women, the audience sees Liang Jing walking like a ghost to grasp the fax and read it without any emotion. It is the content of her stolen diary (pp. 303–304). Interestingly, Liang does believe in karma, and that is why she feels uneasy finding out that someone knows her secret. Wu (2000) states:

If we think that technology in the film (like the fax machine) represents an advanced product, it is rather evidence of surpassing the past and present and of a movement towards the future. The first scene in Good Men, Good Women subverts the perspective toward technology because the fax machine not only conveys the past of Liang Jing and the dead Ah Wei, but also the diary Liang Jing writes after Ah Wei’s death. Liang Jing uses another kind of “technology” (writing a diary) to create the process of memory. The fax machine and television represent “new” products of technology in the twentieth century. What they pass to us “now” is the “old” memory. In other words, these memories come back to Liang Jing because of technology (p. 304).58

Wu also asserts that our body is a kind of “technology” that produces memories. Some people make tattoos, while others make changes to their bodies in order to remember a relationship or the process of their growth. As a result, the body can remember the “past” in the “future.” I disagree with Wu’s assertion because I think “vehicle” is a better description of the body’s function. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see how Wu connects the function of technology with the body, as both of them carry the weight of memory.

57 ibid.
58 ibid.
The figure overleaf describes the relationships between memory, vehicle, and body. It shows that memory can be produced by the body and vehicle.
Figure 3.7 The relationships between memory, vehicle, and body
(This figure stems from Wu’s point)

Wu has suggested that Hou is in favour of mixing film (the product of technology) and reality. One example of this is a scene in *The Puppetmaster* in which the audience one minute might think Li Tian-lu is dead, but the next minute, he sits up from the coffin amusingly, suggesting “don’t take this drama too seriously.” Hou reminds the audience that Li Tian-lu’s autobiography is also a drama. By using three fragmented parts, Hou has already used *The Puppetmaster* to mix history, memory and reality (Lin, 2000, pp. 253–256).

Another example is the time that Liang Jing is walking like a ghost and then starts to vomit in the opening scene in *Good Men, Good Women*. She is vomiting because she is uncomfortable with the fax and worried that Ah Wei’s ghost might come back. Alternatively, another interpretation is that we can see Jiang Bi-yu performed by Liang Jing in the film poster on the glass wall; perhaps the setting of Jiang’s grieving over her husband’s execution in the film rehearsal makes Liang think about their “shared bitterness” – the loss of their lovers.

Wu’s (2000) review of *Good Men, Good Women* describes the relationship between body and memory; “the body is the same as the diary, which is transformed from a mere container ‘filling up’ the past to the tool of producing memories” (p. 305).
Just as the body itself is like a container or diary that accumulates the past and reproduces memories, so Liang Jing is suffering due to her sad memories, and attempts to be reborn with her new partner in order to forget about the past.

While Wu’s theory about how the body conjoins the past and present and produces memories is interesting, we need to look at how memories are replaced due to the passage of time. Hou shows how the memory is re-remembered in *Good Men, Good Women* through the use of the body. Liang Jing has sexual intercourse with a man on her ex-boyfriend’s death anniversary to “re-remember” her dead lover. Therefore, the current boyfriend is actually a replacement for her dead lover. She says, “I do not have protection today, if I am pregnant, the baby must come from my dead lover’s reincarnation.” To clarify, Liang Jing is blackmailed, and that is why the content of her diary is stolen from her fax machine. The content shows her guilt about her ex-boyfriend’s death, because she is the one who gets the compensation fee after the gangster fight, which is related to the government’s corruption and links with land developers. To eliminate the guilt, she wants to have the dead man’s baby. For this reason, she chooses not to use protection on Ah Wei’s death anniversary, so as to get pregnant by her current boyfriend. Her belief that if she is pregnant, the baby is from Ah Wei’s reincarnation, so that in a way she would be having Ah Wei’s baby, may sound ridiculous to the audience, but there is a reason for this; she wants to alleviate her guilt over Ah Wei after taking the settlement fee following his death. Her belief in karma and reincarnation is in line with Buddhist thinking. If a body can produce memory, is it possible that Liang Jing’s idea of having Ah Wei’s baby signifies the intention of “reproducing” memory that is already dead or non-existent?
The diagram 3.8 below shows what Liang Jing’s story signifies:

**Diagram 3.8:**

Liang Jing and Ah Wei’s love = History which already exists

Ah Wei’s reincarnation = reproduction of memory through body (her story)

By reproducing memory with another man, Liang wants to believe that she will have her dead lover’s baby. This overlap and displacement of personal memory can also explain the situation of how Liang instils Jiang’s story in her and then how Liang instils Jiang’s story in the mind of the audience.

**Diagram 3.9:**

Jiang’s story→ instilled in Liang’s body→ through Liang’s performance→ instilled in the audience (part of public memory)

Diagram 3.9 shows the energy transfer and the process of instilment of thoughts through film.

Memory consists of the past and the present and can be selective and fragmentary. In *Good Men, Good Women*, the collected memories are detailed by Liang Jing back and forth, and they are not just about her past and present stories but are also about the heroine Jiang Bi-yu’s life, and about how Liang performs on stage. Liang plays an important role as a converter between the past and the present, and also presents how women survive the death of their lovers.

In the beginning of *Good Men, Good Women*, we hear Liang singing a Mandarin song, “If You are not Here, How Can I Live My Life? (如果沒有你, 日子怎麼過?).” Then, in the next shot we see Liang Jing and Ah Wei caressing each other in front of a mirror. At this moment, the song changes to the Hokkien song by the Taiwanese pop singer, Lin Qiang, “Walking Forward (向前走).” This is intriguing, because the lead actress is thinking about the “past.” The mirror performs the function of “presenting the past” in the film. Hou uses the
mirror reflection to suggest that what we see about the past may be like facing a mirror: it seems accurate but is in reverse. As a result, what someone’s memory represents as good or bad remains a mystery. Does the mirror reflect the truth or is it only an illusion? What is the truth? Who is the arbiter of the truth? Is truth singular or plural? I would argue that truth is always hidden and is all about representation, because one true story can be told in different ways and it also depends on who the audience is and how the audience sees it.

This can be observed clearly in *Good Men, Good Women*. For example, Jiang Bi-youtu and Zhong Hao-dong are regarded as national heroes after helping the Chinese win the Sino-Japanese War. Because of their underground organisation in support of socialism, however, they are seen as Chinese Communist collaborators after the Nationalists’ retreat to Taiwan. As a result, loyalty and betrayal are hard to define. This kind of situation can also be observed in Liang Jing’s relationship with her new boyfriend, while she is fantasising about her dead ex-boyfriend. As already pointed out, not only can the body fill up memories but it also “reproduces” them. As a result, the memory is actually the accumulation of the past and present and is not merely a single piece of remembrance in a certain period of time. It is a jigsaw puzzle of many of life’s moments. In this sense, the relationship between memory and history is significant.

Walter Benjamin (1969) asserts that:

> The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seised only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again…For every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably (p. 255).

To know history, we have to grasp our memory. Benjamin implies that we have to “reinterpret history” lest we forget it. For example, it is the audience’s role to stitch together the lost pieces of memories of Liang Jing’s stories, and make them their own
experience. But how accurate is the interpretation? We cannot be sure because memory varies from person to person, and it also changes with time and experiences. Hou knows that his mission is to reinterpret history before people forget about it, but he is caught in a predicament, because memory changes with time. Therefore, Hou knows the limitations of film and gives people a hint that what we are seeing in *Good Men, Good Women* is just someone’s flash of memory. He should not be blamed if there is misinterpretation of history in Liang’s stories. Hou’s intention is to avoid being caught himself in the misinterpretation of history. By dividing *Good Men, Good Women* into three parts, he shows how memory can be multiple: how it can be seen from a number of different and equally valid angles.

**Conclusion**

Hou has succeeded in utilising Liang Jing’s narration to describe the terror not only of a woman but also the terror of many Taiwanese in that era. With the use of Liang Jing’s body, which produces her story and memory, Hou is able to reproduce history and prompts the audience to revisit history with Liang’s guidance. His intention is not to lick the historical wound but to lift the veil of terror and encourage people to face it, deal with it, and put it away. The next chapter will discuss the more complicated human relationships in 2005 Taiwan, in Hou’s *A Time for Youth* in *Three Times*, which will be compared with *Good Men, Good Women*, as they are both set in modern Taipei after the lifting of martial law.
Chapter Four:
Space, Landscape, and Indirectness in *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*

The words civil society name the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks – formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology – that fill this space (Walzer, 1998, p.7).

Do not underestimate the power of words, they will leave a lot of imaginative space (Hou, as cited in He, 2010, n.d.).

In Chapter Three, I engaged with Hou Hsiao-hsien’s women-focused historical film, *Good Men, Good Women*, which is set in Taiwan in both the 1940s and the 1990s. In *Good Men, Good Women*, we can see the true colours of not only the national heroine, Jiang Bi-yu, but also the modern woman, Liang Jing, in the 1990s. Through the memory of their personal lives, we can also learn about Taiwan’s social and cultural change from the 1940s to the 1990s.

In this chapter, I will discuss Hou’s later work, *Three Times*, which is divided into three stories and continues to focus on women and Taiwanese history. In addition, *Three Times* has made the representation of history in Taiwan more complete, with its use of spatial aesthetics, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In order to understand Hou’s aesthetics of space, I begin with a discussion of Nick Browne’s (2000) and Li Zhen-ya’s (2000) theories on space in *The Puppetmaster*. I will then apply Stephanie Donald’s (2000) theory on Chinese cinema to Hou’s films. I argue that, with the use of indirectness, Hou has successfully conveyed his political ideology in his films. This chapter will discuss how Hou Hsiao-hsien uses aesthetic techniques to mask the political
significance of his films. It will focus on the relationship between space, landscape and indirectness in *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*. It will then address three types of parallel in *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*: family story and political history; the individual fate and Taiwan’s fate; and human relationships and Taiwan’s international relationships.

Family stories can be very political in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films. Some scholars and film critics think that Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films are similar to those of Yasujiro Ozu, as they both use family stories in their films.\(^{59}\) The difference between Hou and Ozu is, however, that Ozu’s stories focus on family itself, while Hou’s focus on family stories with another dimension, which is related to political history. In *A City of Sadness*, it is not hard to understand how Hou uses the housewife’s diary to reveal the cruelty of the Nationalist party in Taiwan after WWII. And in *Good Men, Good Women*, the role of the national heroine Jiang Bi-yu is like a wake-up call for Liang Jing, who led a decadent life in the 1990s. In *The Puppetmaster*, Hou uses the life of the puppeteer, Li Tian-lu, to cover the era from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. During Li Tian-lu’s life, we see the political change from the late Qing Dynasty to Japanese colonisation and then how Taiwan is handed over to the Nationalists. *Three Times* (2005), on the surface, is like three women’s stories in different eras: the 1910s, 1960s, and 2005. I would argue that political history has been embedded very subtly, through the use of space and indirectness. This chapter will outline the relationship between family stories and political history and also detail how Hou masks his political films with his film aesthetics.

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\(^{59}\) See, for example, Stanbrook (1990, pp. 120–124) and Needham (2006, pp. 369–383).
Summary and analysis of *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*

*The Puppetmaster* is about Li Tian-lu’s autobiography, which spans between the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Taiwan. During his life, Taiwan underwent two political transitions: first from the Qing Dynasty to Japanese colonisation (1895–1945), and then from Japanese colonisation to KMT’s retreat to Taiwan (1945–1947). In Li’s story, the change of politics also affects his performance of puppet drama. Even though the era has changed, Li’s dignity as a puppet master has not changed. As a result, although the film is about Li Tian-lu’s autobiography, it is also about the concerns of history. The film has an open ending: it ends with the KMT’s takeover of Taiwan but does not show the result of that political domination.

There are three stories in *Three Times*. They are *A Time for Love*, *A Time for Freedom*, and *A Time for Youth*.

*A Time for Love*: In 1966, Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in China; meanwhile, Taiwan had become one of the anti-Communist areas protected by the US military during the Cold War. During the Vietnam War, Taiwan was an important stop for the American military on the way to Vietnam. American films, TV programs, pop music, and sub-culture were popular and became a form of soft power in Taiwan. The popularity of American culture followed in the wake of 51 years of Japanese colonisation in post-WWII Taiwan. In *Three Times*, at that time, Taiwanese teenagers did not know much about the revolution and war because the media were controlled by the government; their main concerns were with their own intimate relationships. Inside a Japanese-style house we can see a pool hall, which had become part of Taiwanese teenagers’ lives in the 1960s. The playing of music, from a Taiwanese song to a Japanese tune, then to the American song, Aphrodite’s Child’s ‘Rain and Tears,’ shows the cultural transformation of Taiwan within an interior space. Taiwan had emerged from Japanese colonisation and US pop culture had prevailed.
**A Time for Freedom:** In 1911, during the Xin-hai revolution, the Qing Dynasty was replaced by the Republic of China. At that time, Taiwan had been colonised by Japan for seventeen years since Qing’s cession in 1895. The main character in this film is a newspaper editor in the Chinese department. At that time, newspapers in Taiwan were printed in Chinese and Japanese versions. This man also organised a poem club, using the language of Chinese to fight against the corruption of Japanese colonisation. The club had a strong sense of national identity. In March 1911, the Chinese intellectual and political activist Liang Qichao, regarded as a traitor by the Qing government, fled to Japan and Taiwan. Spending a month in Taiwan, Liang inspired modern Taiwanese scholars. His intention was to unite them to fight against the Japanese government. Those scholars were always associated with the geishas, who could sing and recite poetry. If a geisha was lucky enough, a customer might redeem her with a sum of money. The geisha in the film is desperate to be freed, but her dream is shattered when she realises that her lover’s revolution for freedom does not succeed. The geisha and the revolutionary had different kinds of dreams of freedom: one was for the individual’s fate and the other was for the nation’s fate.

**A Time for Youth:** This is set in 2005. During this time, Taiwan was under the DPP rule and there were more democratic freedoms, including freedom for youth to do whatever they liked within the limits of the law. The bi-sexual affairs of Ouyang Jing, a mentally ill singer, are presented to show purposelessness and a lack of commitment after physical pleasure experienced by the younger generation. In A Time for Youth, the bar culture which usually allows instant physical intimacy among people also makes people confused. So freedom for people who have long been suppressed can create new problems for them.

**Individual fate vs. Taiwan’s fate.** Hou is very good at making a connection between individual fate and a nation’s fate. In order to convey this political ideology, Li Tian-lu’s life is used as a film script, but what really counts in the film are those changing moments in
politics, because the macro-history will also affect micro-history. Hou once said that the changing era (like post-WWII) interests him a lot, because it means the advantages to people will be re-allocated.\(^{60}\) In addition, on the surface, *Three Times* is concerned with three women’s love stories. What lies underneath is that those women are living not only in a different era in Taiwan, but also under different political control: namely, the KMT, Japan, and the DPP. This means individual fate and the nation’s fate are strongly connected in Hou’s films.

**Human relationships vs. Taiwan’s international relationships.** In *The Puppetmaster*, Li Tian-lu’s artist life was influenced by political changes. We see how Li is required to perform the puppet drama in Japanese in the Kominka movement. In *A Time for Love* in *Three Times*, the changing from a Japanese tune and Hokkien lyric song to American music plays an important role, as it implies the political preference of Taiwan. In *A Time for Freedom* in *Three Times*, the newspaper has become a vehicle for conveying revolutionary ideas against the Japanese government among intellectuals in China and Taiwan alike. The media, including pop music and newspapers, can be a kind of soft power that exposes people to the world outside Taiwan. As a result, a human’s relationship with the media also symbolises Taiwan’s relationship with the other countries. The way soft power affects Taiwanese people’s life is also represented in Hou’s films.

**An analysis of the films**

**Politics and Hou’s films.** Hou utilises space carefully to help the audience to understand the political dimension in his films. This point, however, is not taken by Nick Browne (2000), who argues that Hou’s films are family-oriented stories rather than tools used

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\(^{60}\) Hou once said about this in *The Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (Olivier Assayas, 1997).
to convey political history. In his article, Browne (2000) states:

…here history is not a political history, but a family history. In A Time to Live, and A Time to Die, the only meaningful time is the time when the family gets together. But in The Puppetmaster, although the politics has a real effect and influence, under the landscape and people’s destiny, politics is just a flash in the pan (pp. 228–229).

Browne believes that politics in Hou’s films are just something trivial passing by. What really counts is the family stories. He believes that political issues are not the main point in Hou’s films. He also suggests that in The Puppetmaster, one can feel the effect of “the Confucian,” because the décor inside the Japanese-style house also represents the human relationships within a family. He argues that this “location,” because of how it is built, has become the transparent space between family members, which implies people’s responsibility, obligation, and privilege with respect to each other (Browne, 2000, pp. 216–217). Here, I question what Browne means by a “Confucian” model. It remains unclear to me, as Browne bases the representation of “human order” merely on the “allocation of furniture” in the interior/family space.

Taiwan places a stronger emphasis on Confucian values than on China. It cannot be denied that Confucianism did play a significant role in Taiwan after the KMT’s retreat to the island. Because of the prevalence of Confucianism, KMT could follow a rational line to dominate people. What, then, is Confucian thought? The original idea of Confucianism is 君 jun (monarch), 臣 chen (courtier), 父 fu (father), 子 zi (son) meaning a monarch should be a benevolent monarch to his people. A courtier should be a faithful courtier to his lord. A father should be kind to his son. A son should be filial to his father. However, the misinterpretation of KMT’s Confucianism’s “君臣, 父子 (monarch, courtier, father, son)”

61 This idea was originally Confucius’ answer when he was asked by 奇景公 (a monarch in the Chungqiu Dynasty) about the solution for China then. Also important is the human relation of 君臣, 父子, which expands to couples, siblings and friends. That is the so-called five ethical orders (五倫). See (Fu, 1999).
turns it into: (A) the Monarch is the most important and should be most respected by the people, and is followed by (B) courtier, (C) father, and (D) son. (E) couples, siblings, and friends are the last group to be respected and considered by people. This idea is very different from individualism in the West, which means Chinese culture is more about human relations than focusing on each individual.

Returning to Browne’s (2000) argument about Hou’s *The Puppetmaster*, we observe the idea of respecting and obeying the father (no matter what he says), but this is over-emphasised by Taiwanese in the patriarchal society of Taiwan. Browne’s idea of the connection between Confucianism and interior space in *The Puppetmaster* does not achieve his goal. Even though Confucianism is emphasised in Taiwan, it does not show from the interior space as Browne believes. Meanwhile, even though within the interior space Confucian thinking is existent, it is not merely about the relationship among (E) couples, siblings, and friends, (D) son, and (C) father. (See Figure 4.1 overleaf) It also signifies the relationship between (C)+(D)+(E) [people] and (A)+(B) [government]. In order to understand Hou’s films thoroughly, we should also focus on the monarch and the courtier (the blue part of Figure 4.1) and think about what the relationship between family (the yellow part) and government (the blue part) is, as they are inseparable. Unfortunately, Browne’s understanding of Hou’s films is limited to the family (the yellow part), as shown below.
Figure 4.1 My explanation of the five ethical orders in Confucianism, *wuluün* (五倫). The blue part is the government of today. The yellow part stands for people/family.

Why is Browne’s conception so limited in saying that politics are just a flash in the pan? It seems that he does not pick up the cultural references and different layers of the film, and assumes that the audience sees only as he does. Browne does not address the aesthetic treatment of politics, which explains why he overlooks the importance of politics in Hou’s films. I argue that political circumstances have influenced Hou’s aesthetic development as a filmmaker and that analysis of the socio-cultural texts in Taiwan reveals they can be read in many different ways.

In short, Browne’s representation of Hou’s films as depoliticised is simplistic. Insensitive to the political dimension, he ignores the context of censorship in Taiwan, which constrains Hou in making explicit reference to politics.
The political subconsciousness of Hou’s films. Liao Bing-hui (2000) makes a helpful observation of the close relationship between the government and the people in Hou’s films:

In *A City of Sadness*, males have done a lot for females, and the government works hard for people’s brighter future; however, this “benevolence” cannot be realised by children or women until one day, ‘truth’ is revealed. Maybe these kind of “self-reliant” males are the political subconsciousness, which has not been discovered on film and TV (pp. 256–263)?

According to Liao, as men have done a lot for women and the government has done a lot for the people, women and ordinary people need to be obedient to those who have assisted them. This stereotype holds that women are dependent, just as the people are dependent on the government. This suggests that women are submissive because they have no choice, under Hou’s lens. This image of “self-reliant” males shown on screen over and over again in Hou’s films is very controversial. In *The Puppetmaster*, Li Tian-lu has his reasons for being too close to the Japanese government because he has to financially support his whole family. If he is close to the Japanese government, his puppet show is more easily seen in public. Even Li has a mistress in the brothel, adultery becomes romantic and nostalgic as he says in the narration. If man and government represent authority under the Confucianism system, and must be obeyed, then woman represents the people who must obey. No matter how wrong the government/man is, the people/woman must be tolerant and obedient. Government and men play the role of the dictatorship in Hou’s films in the name of monarchy and patriarchy.

Li’s wife is “invisible” in the film, which suggests that she can do nothing about his affair, as Li is the ‘financial supporter’ of the family. However, Liao’s idea of seeing women depend on men and women needing to be obedient toward men, much like the people depending on the government, is contentious. If we focus on the notion that women should be faithful to men and reliant on men, Li’s mistress’ story is a subversion of that, as she
eventually leaves Li. Thus, the ‘independence’ of women here is evident, because she does not sacrifice her happiness to be with a married man. Further, Li is ‘tested’ by his mistress’ good friend to see if he can resist temptation. Li, in being unfaithful to his wife, proves to be ‘faithful’ to his mistress. Yet, in the end, he chooses to be with his family. So, how can one define whether Li is faithful or not? This situation can also explain Li’s philosophy in dealing with the dominant power. Li was once questioned as a Japanese collaborator about his relationship with the Japanese government. But for him, it does not matter if the Japanese or the KMT have political power: as long as he performs the political propaganda in the first twenty minutes before the show starts, his show can continue, and it is not his concern who is the political leader. Just as he is not loyal to his mistress, so he is not loyal to the Japanese government: both situations are temporary. Li does what he has to do to survive.

Why does Hou use the semi-autobiography of a puppet master, Li Tian-lu, as part of his “national trilogy”? Puppet drama was originally from the Hokkien Province in China and was popularised during the late Ming Dynasty. Later, the art of puppetry was brought to Taiwan during the Qing Dynasty. It was very popular among the Taiwanese before Japanese rule began in 1895. Li Tian-lu coincidentally was born in this transitional period in Taiwan. I believe that is the first reason he was chosen by Hou as part of the national trilogy. Secondly, the art of puppetry encountered difficulties because of the cultural hegemony of the Japanese and KMT. According to Li, puppet drama was Japanised during the Kominka movement. Because the film ended with Japan’s surrender, we cannot see how puppet drama became propaganda for anti-Communism in the 1950s and how it was banned in Taiwan by the KMT later on in the 1960s (because the use of Hokkien in puppet drama breached Mandarin propaganda and Mandarin puppet drama was not popular among local Taiwanese).62 The fate

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of Taiwanese puppetry also symbolises that of the Taiwanese people of Li Tian-lu’s generation. Again, the government and the people have an inseparable relationship in *The Puppetmaster*. This entangled and complex relationship is set out in Table 4.2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan ruled by Qing (in 1895)</td>
<td>→ Japanese rule (1895 – 1945)</td>
<td>→ KMT rule (1947)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li’s Family Life:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li with his wife</td>
<td>→ engagement with mistress</td>
<td>→ back to his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puppet Theatre:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puppet drama from China</td>
<td>→ Japanised puppet performance</td>
<td>[→ banned by KMT]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.2: The relationship between government, family, and puppet theatre**

Note: The last column “banned by KMT” was shown inside of the brackets ([[]]) because it was the fact but not shown in *The Puppetmaster* which ended in the KMT’s takeover.

Another example of men working hard for women and family, which signifies the political subconsciousness that the government is working hard for the people, can be seen in *A Time to Live, and A Time to Die*. Hou and his siblings did not realise that his hard-working distant father had done so much for them until after they read their father’s will. If “sacrifice is another kind of requirement,” the males in Hou’s films want positive feedback from their spouse or the next generation, and this functions as a concealed political subconsciousness in Hou’s films. In other words, the government wants its people to recognise and cherish its efforts, no matter what the situation is and how much it costs to ‘keep social order,’ much

http://content.edu.tw/senior/chinese/ks_rs/content/taiwanese/local/doll/doll.html [my translation]
like the February 28 Incident was in the name of ‘keeping social order’; thus, the violence of the government is ‘rationalised’ because of the convenience of domination. The above-described situation best interprets the entangled relationship between the government and the people, presented as human relations in Hou’s films. From the above-mentioned examples, we can see clearly that Hou’s films are political and not only about family stories.

**Should Hou’s films be de-politicised?**

Li Zhen-ya (2000) does not share Browne’s view that Hou’s trilogy focuses only on the family, stating:

…family time and natural space are a metaphor for politics and history…family time and natural space become a real existence, used to protest against the exterior colonising power…in fact, interior/family time/space is always political/historical time/space (p. 135).63

Li holds that political history cannot be ignored in Hou’s films. I concur with his theory that the representation of interior/family space in Hou’s films is not as straightforward as it appears. Meanwhile, Li Zhen-ya (2000), who believes family time and natural space are a metaphor for politics and history, sees only the political aspects and ignores the poetic style of Hou’s films. Hou is necessarily strategic in presenting his political content in order to survive in the film industry, but he also shows humanist concerns subtly through his poetic style. In *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*, for example, Hou emphasises the relationship between family and space, which creates spaces for the audience to think about the interwoven relationship between micro-history and macro-history.

Li (2000) further suggests that *A Time to Live, and A Time to Die* is more than just an autobiography: it may also be read as a metaphor for Taiwan’s transformation to modernity.

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63 My translation.
Similarly, Peggy Jiao (1988) notes that “When he (Hou) describes his memory of childhood and teenagehood, his film becomes a metaphor of the transformation of Taiwan to modernity” (p. 423).

This is also the case in Li Tian-lu’s semi-autobiographical tale, *The Puppetmaster*. On the surface, it is about Li’s life until the return of Taiwan to China after 1945. However, the film is also about the art of puppetry, Taiwanese dignity, and the transformation of Taiwan. In these two semi-autobiographical films, interior space is shown most of the time, instead of exterior space, and family life is used to represent Taiwanese society. Part of this has to do with the nature of life under KMT rule. Because of the use of interior space, Hou wants to show the audience that, in order to look at history in a complete view, we must look at the individual family story as well as the official history.

**Hou and humanism: people on the edge**

The description of “people on the edge” comes from a book title: *Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After* (2005), by Chris Berry and Feii Lu, in which the authors talk about the film projects that reflect Taiwan’s cultural development, its role in the Cold War and its aftermath, decolonisation and modernity. That kind of isolation can be shown through some Taiwanese directors’ films, like those of Ang Lee, Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien. In Hou’s films, people are always on the edge. For example, in *A Time for Love* in *Three Times*, the lead actor is on the edge of his life: he fails the college entrance exam and has no luck getting a girlfriend working in the pool hall in the beginning. In *A Time for Freedom*, the couple are on the edge of getting freedom. In *A Time for Youth*, the bi-sexual Ouyang Jing is also on the edge of choosing her true lover.

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64 ibid.
If people on the edge are necessary in Hou’s films to show the phenomenon of an island on the edge, what about the meaning of the space? Interior space in Hou’s films is not just about family story but also signifies the change of Taiwan over time because the interior space is also a microcosm of Taiwan’s internal life.

**The implications of indirectness in Chinese culture**

The significance of family and women in space in Chinese cinema can be further explored using Stephanie Donald’s (2000) theory:

Family life is part and parcel of Chinese cinema. The theme cropped up several times in my accounts of Chinese cinema history…It is the core of melodramatic narration, and it is an excellent framework for political storytelling (p. 41).

I concur with Donald that Hou’s use of family life conveys a political intention to the audience. The semi-melodramatic narration through the puppet master, Li Tian-lu, or the later ones in *Three Times*, sends important messages, indirectly but with warmth, to the audience.

This indirectness has been an iconic feature of Hou’s films. When Peggy Jiao (2001) asked Hou, “How did you condense Li Tian-lu’s many life experiences into a movie? We have noticed how economical you have become,” he replied:

…it’s like a piece of rope which you dip in oil. You only want to use one portion of it but the whole rope must still be soaked. This is what is meant by “the part showing the whole.” This type of structure is like our ancient Chinese theatre. It simply gives you a scene without much of a clear narrative, unlike Western drama where all the elements must be put in a place. Ellipsis and other indirect narrative methods are, ironically, more clear-cut and to the point. It all depends on how you master these methods (p. 4).

While Hou’s films seem economical, the truth is that the story does not have to be revealed in detail: the audience can sense what is going on despite the many ellipses. This can be observed not only in *The Puppetmaster* but also in *Three Times*. In the former, Li’s life is presented fragmentally. In the latter, three women’s affairs are like a collection of many snap shots. If a story is easy to understand, one does not have to think. With Hou’s film, one must
think, immersing oneself in the story. The resonance of the film is greater for the audience than if it only watches a story told in great detail. For a film that is easy to watch, one does not have to use the heart and mind to understand it. There is a kind of aesthetic use of general spaces in Hou’s film, called *liu-bai* (leaving the whiteness), as Jiao (1993) points out:

As for Hou’s economy of style, it is in line with the concept of “liu-bai” (leaving the whiteness) in traditional painting. This is illustrated by Hou’s utilisation of space, sound and events that assume even more importance outside the frame than inside it. The audience is made to participate and imagine. The method is one where reality and the imagination mutually feed on each other, as in the phrase, “A state is born from outside the image, inside the boundary we see a limitless frontier” (p. 7).

As we can see, Jiao and Li share the idea that Hou’s use of space always goes beyond the surface. Hou’s illustration of space has a simple charm, but it means more than it appears. Hou has further stated:

I have always been searching for a particular Chinese style and method of expressing feelings. The Chinese people have always gone about a tortuous and roundabout route in expressing emotions. Like my wife, for instance. I bought her a watch. Her first reaction was to ask, “how much did it cost?” I replied, forty thousand Taiwanese dollars, and she scolded at me, “You’ve gone off your head!” But then, she immediately went to the kitchen and cooked me some nice dishes to eat. This is how the Chinese express their emotion (Jiao, 2001, p.5).

Hou suggests that the Chinese do not usually show their feelings directly. In this circumstance, instead of saying “thank you,” Hou’s wife remonstrates with him about how expensive the watch was to show that he should not have “wasted” so much money on her. But later, she still shows her “appreciation” by cooking him a nice meal. Love for the family can sometimes be shown with a seemingly harsh attitude.

It is interesting to see how Hou is observant about his life experiences as a Chinese/Taiwanese himself and how he utilises the Chinese element in poetry and art in his films. The interview with Jiao implies the indirectness with which people interact with their family in Taiwanese/Chinese culture. If the Chinese element in poetry and art is an important
technique in Hou’s films, how does Hou employ it in *The Puppetmaster* and *Three Times*?

**Chinese montage and Hou’s shots on landscape.** Catherine Yi-yu Cho Woo points out that transitional shots can express the director’s central theme and to create “Chinese montage” warrants discussion. What is “Chinese montage”? According to Catherine Yi-yu Cho Woo (1989),

A scene in *Huang Zumo’s Romance on Lushan Mountain* (1980) is designed to reveal with delicate natural symbolism the unseen, unspoken passion of human lovers. In the first shot, the camera shows two young people in love talking together in an idyllic landscape; the second, a pond where fish are swimming freely. (Note that this cutaway shot functions in a way similar to the Chinese montage, though on a smaller scale, and that it is always formally related; a single, simple, natural image.) Whereas a Western viewer may have expected to see the passionate embraces of this Chinese Romeo and Juliet, a Chinese viewer subtly experiences the free, loving intimacy of the lovers through the image of the swimming fish. The symbolic meaning is familiar to the reader of Chinese—for example, “like fish in water—free and happy” (“ru yu de shui”) is a very common Chinese expression. Also, as fish are reputed to swim in pairs, so a pair of fish is emblematic of the joy of union, especially of a sexual nature (p. 25).

It is clear from the above that in Chinese montage less is absolutely more. This is the essence of Chinese-liu-bai (leaving the whiteness) (as cited in Yeh, 2001, p. 65). Hou is also in favour of the idea of leaving the audience space for imagination. Hou uses not only Chinese montage but also a poetic style in his films, as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

**Case Study: Scene-by-scene analysis**

**Landscape**

**Landscape in *The Puppetmaster.*** Life and death are recurrent themes in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films. In *A City of Sadness*, at Lin Wen-xiong’s funeral, we see a shot of a flying bird in the sky to represent Wen-xiong’s departure from his family. The black and white shot emphasises not only the sadness of the Lin family but also the sadness of the Taiwanese. In *The Puppetmaster*, Li Tian-lu’s grandmother passes away. The use of a long-take of the white sky and smoke coming out from the dust symbolises that Li’s grandmother has gone with the
wind and life is fleeting. It not only demonstrates Chinese montage but also proves the idea that Hou is inspired by the Chinese mainland writer, Shen Chongwen, who gave him a central idea for his films: to be an impartial observer of life and death (Zhang, 1990, pp. 69–70).

Another long take of the landscape occurs before showing a Japanised puppet drama in *The Puppetmaster*. We see about one minute of the vast greenish landscape of a forest, with some people walking on the drawbridge in the distance. Just before we wonder what happened, the narration of a Japanese navy soldier appears. The navy soldier describes the honourable death of one Taiwanese, with a Japanese surname 島崎 (Douki), thought to be an army correspondent, in fighting the US. The soldier continues, Douki will always be remembered because his sacrifice will have the prosperity of the Emperor and eternal world peace in return. His spirit is like a cherry blossom’s (sakura’s) life; short but beautiful. He was born as the son of the Emperor and died with the Japanese spirit. It will lead to eternity and all ages are immortal.65 Later, we see the hero’s story in the puppet drama narrated in Japanese. The aesthetic treatment of politics is shown again in the film. The eternal energy of the scene is strong through the use of landscape. Hou is in favour of using the landscape to detail the funeral scene, an idea which may have stemmed from the Chinese saying, 塵歸塵, 土歸土 (earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust).

**Exterior space in *A Time for Love*.** In *A Time for Love* in *Three Times*, we see the lead actor’s personal journey. In the beginning, we see him riding a bike as he describes how he failed the college entrance exam. This is the age of innocence. Later, when he is on holiday from military service, he falls in love with a pool hall lady but it does not work out.66 Later, he falls in love with another lady who worked in the pool hall, who has changed jobs

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65 This is a Japanese soldier’s narration for one Taiwanese puppetry before the show starts. See *The Puppetmaster*. [My translation]

66 The lead actor at first had crush on a lady called Haruko (春子) who worked in the pool hall. But he got rejected.
from Kaohsiung to Chiayi. Thus the exterior space represents the train stops from the south to the middle of Taiwan, representing the protagonist’s search for his beloved. From the bike to the train his rite of passage is also shown, from a naive boy (who failed the college exam and had no idea about the future) to a mature man (who was trained in the military and finally knows who he wanted to love).

In *A Time for Love*, Hou uses a more delicate method of reflecting exterior social change through the use of the lead actor’s journey. Compared to Hou’s Taiwanese trilogy, *A Time for Love* is the most harmonious one in terms of the political situation inside of Taiwan, in spite of the political chaos outside of Taiwan. Hou in *A Time for Love* has proposed a new kind of concept that relates not only to the co-existence of micro-history and macro-history but also being peaceful in order to live together (和解共生). This is the rite of passage not only of Hou but also Taiwan.

**Sound**

**Silence in *A Time for Freedom***. In *A Time for Freedom* in *Three Times*, Hou intentionally eliminates the lead actor’s and lead actress’ voices in their conversation, which is a metaphor that people at that time were not allowed to talk about politics. The brothel is preserved in a Chinese style, which represents the Chinese revolution against Japanese colonisation because the indoor space also represents Taiwanese people’s thinking around that time.
Even though I know this is a sad place, I still return,

明知此是傷心地，亦到維舟首重回，

During these seventeen years, I feel sad about what happened under this Chun-Fan Building.

十七年中多少事，春帆樓下晚濤哀。

馬關夜泊——A Time for Freedom in Three Times

This poem by Liang Qichao speaks of the humiliation of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, under which China ceded Taiwan to Japan. In addition, the poem is also about the affection the customer has for the geisha. The geisha sheds tears after reading the letter. At this moment, silence/speechlessness can best describe not only Taiwanese individual concerns for politics but also the nation’s fate.

There are three major points I intend to discuss in A Time for Freedom: first, the use of silence in this film compared to A City of Sadness; second, the use of space compared to Hou’s earlier film, Flowers of Shanghai; third, the similarity and differences of A Time for Freedom and Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi’s Gion Bayashi, which is also about the mental conflict of a geisha in post-war Japan.

Interestingly, Hou uses silence in dialogue in A Time for Freedom in Three Times. This is because modern actors and actresses find it difficult to speak like people of early twentieth-century Taiwan, that is, in Japanese and Hokkien. This kind of situation is very similar to Hou’s decision to make Wen-qing (played by Tony Leung) a deaf-mute.

67 My translation.
68 This idea can be seen in his interview with Hong Kong University students in the behind the scenes section in Three Times DVD.
photographer in *A City of Sadness*, as the Hong Kong actor, Tony Leung, cannot speak Hokkien, which is the main language used in *A City of Sadness*. Silence speaks louder than words, showing how Taiwanese are unable to express what they see and feel in politics in public, first under Japanese colonisation and then under KMT martial law. Wen-qing is a deaf-mute photographer who represents the silenced Taiwanese population. Wen-qing’s role in *A City of Sadness* is to act as a witness for the events that culminated in the February 28 Incident. Wen-qing represents the oppressed voice of the people after the introduction of martial law. Just as Wen-qing witnessed the February 28 Incident, so did the Taiwanese population. The Taiwanese were unable to speak of the Incident, just as the mute Wen-qing is unable to speak. Wen-qing eventually gets involved in politics and is arrested for assisting in illegal political operations. The cruelty of politics is suggested indirectly by the family photos taken by Wen-qing and also in the diary of Wen-qing’s beloved wife, Kuan-mei. Again, in the beginning of *A Time for Freedom*, we hear the geisha’s singing with music played by Chinese musical instruments. However, the use of silence is the best expression of women at that time, who did not enjoy freedom in a patriarchal society. It has a very powerful impact because it shows the bitterness of being a geisha who can never in her life leave the brothel. Although the geisha and the Chinese revolutionary customer really love each other, she cannot marry him because the revolution is not successful. The private romance also includes the historical events which engage with the interweaving of history and cultures in Taiwan, China and Japan.

Sound is often reduced to a minimum in *A Time for Freedom*. The people of Taiwan at that time suffered the same fate as the geisha and her customer in the film, who were bitter and full of contradictions in their minds. They wanted to talk about the nation (國) and also about the family (家). But, most of the time, leaving something unsaid (being silent) was
better than being frank with each other, since they could not change the current social and cultural situation. Hou again utilises the woman’s fate (the geisha) as a metaphor to express Taiwan’s fate during that time, a place longing to be freed by China but failing to seek its own happiness in the end.

The use of space and poetics is another element of Hou’s *A Time for Freedom*. It is very easy for the audience to compare it with Hou’s other film, *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), which is also set in a brothel. Hou’s *A Time for Freedom* is more viewer-friendly because it does not have the complicated politics or a language which Taiwanese do not use, Shanghainese, and darkness in the brothel like in *Flowers of Shanghai*. *A Time for Freedom*, shot in black and white, does not have many characters and its dialogue is shown on screen in written form. *A Time for Freedom* takes a step further by simplifying the relationship between characters to bring out the lead actor’s concern for the nation. Both films use close-ups to make the film more character-focused for the audience. This is explained during Hou’s interview with Li Da-yi (1999), in which he noted:

My idea of cinema before making *Boys from Fengkuei* was rather simple: narrative, to tell the story in the script. Later on, I met some filmmakers who’d returned to Taiwan from abroad. They had a lot of theories about cinema, which got me all confused. I was puzzled; the script was ready but I didn’t know how to give it form. At that time my script writer was Chu Tien-wen. After listening to me, she gave me a copy of Shen Congwen’s autobiography. After reading the book I discovered that Shen’s point of view was somewhat like looking down from above...Making *Flowers of Shanghai*, I put the camera very close to the characters and watch them, without interference, without judgment, and without emotion. Previously I thought the camera must stay at a distance to present a point of view that overlooks things and is without emotion. With this film I discovered that such a point of view is actually contingent upon how you present the characters. You can be very cool and cold on the set, and still like/love your character[s], you can be with them and at the same time watch over them. You can still achieve the same result even if the camera is moving on them. The camera is like a person sitting on the side. He’s looking at these people. Sometimes he’s looking at this person from this side. Then he hears a voice over there and turns his head. Since the camera cannot turn as fast as a human head, it turns slowly. So maybe by the time he’s turned his head that person may have left or stopped talking. But that’s ok. In fact it’s rather like the narrative in the original novel (p. 19).
Above, Hou explains why, after *Flowers of Shanghai*, he intends to use more close-ups to present the true colours of the character, so the audience can feel the bitterness and sadness of the geisha in *A Time for Love*, when she is singing a song in front of her customers, for example. Within a small space, the poetics manifest through the camera movement from the long take to the close-up on the geisha’s face. Because of the close-up, the audience can understand much more about her inner world. In addition, we only hear the geisha’s voice for the first time the when close-up occurs at the end of the film. This represents that the geisha can never be redeemed by her love and has to keep singing with sadness to survive.

Finally, the film aesthetic Hou is using compares to that of Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi. According to Donald Kirihara (1992), Hou’s long shot–long take techniques are reminiscent of those of Mizoguchi. I will use a geisha film of Mizoguchi’s, *Gion Bayashi*, to make a comparison. Even though the plot similarly focuses on one geisha’s fate, the ways Hou and Mizogushi use the camera are quite different. Mizoguchi tends to use the camera shooting from above (see Figure 4.3) or below (see Figure 4.4) while Hou tends to use a level shot (see Figure 4.5 and Figure 4.6). Mizoguchi is viewing women more as an object to be desired (camera from below) or to be possessed (camera from above) because the camera creates a position of dominance for the viewer, while Hou is viewing women more equally with the level shot.
Figure 4.3: Geisha learning about tea ceremony in *Gion Bayashi* (1953)

Figure 4.4: The process of becoming a geisha: dance in *Gion Bayashi* (1953)

Figure 4.5: Geisha saying good bye to her beloved sister when she is redeemed in *Three Times* (2005)
The only similarity between A Time for Freedom and Gion Bayashi lies in the disappointment of both geishas. In A Time for Freedom, the geisha longs for freedom from the one she loves but dreams in vain of being free, as her revolutionary lover does not succeed in the revolution. In Gion Bayashi, the geisha, called a “post-war geisha,” makes up her mind that she will not become a prostitute like her other colleagues, and represents the beauty of Japan as a proud geisha. However, her sense of pride and dignity disappears after realising that the geisha she has always respected was also a prostitute. Gion Bayashi not only shows a personal conflict to fit into the society but also symbolises the dilemma of pre and post-war Japan, and its love-hate political relationship with the US. Therefore, in terms of film aesthetics, A Time for Freedom in Three Times differs from Gion Bayashi, although the contexts bear a resemblance to one another, as the former is about disappointment in the Japanese domination and the hope for freedom by China shattered, the latter is about the love and hate relationship between Japan and the US. In short, Hou and Mizoguchi both use geisha to present the internal conflicts and political situations in Taiwan and Japan individually with different film aesthetics.
The political propaganda scene in *The Puppetmaster*

As mentioned earlier, according to Stephanie Donald (2000), family life is an integral aspect of Chinese cinema (p. 41), which can be seen in Hou’s films. In addition, in Peggy Jiao’s interview with Hou in 1993, he explains how Chinese life experience has always been very political. A scene in *The Puppetmaster* best describes this. Li says that in order to survive he must give in and perform the political propaganda that Japanese soldiers like to watch. So, in one of the outdoor scenes, we can observe how awkward it is for the Taiwanese hand-puppets to wear Japanese uniforms and talk about how great the Japanese Emperor is, and how it is a kind of honour to die for the Emperor during the performance. Li also confesses that they only perform Japanese content in the first twenty minutes; when the soldiers are gone, they switch back to Hokkien. Another political scene shows the Japanese soldiers asking the village leader to give some Chinese opera tickets to some Taiwanese people. While watching the Chinese opera, their Chinese-style hair of the Qing Dynasty will be shaved by a barber. This “free ticket performance” has the political intention of “Japanising” the Taiwanese. This “clear cut” (from the Chinese style to the Japanese style) of the hair on the Taiwanese shows the Japanese ambition to differentiate between Taiwanese and Chinese, and to assimilate the Taiwanese to the Japanese as a first step. Again, this scene shows the family is heavily influenced by politics.

The individual triangle relationship vs. the complicated international relationships

*A Time for Youth* details not only the pop culture and degenerate life of a mentally ill singer in Taiwan, but also a social phenomenon. Because of youth, we are daring. Because of youth, we make mistakes. Because of youth, we must be cool. In the opening shots of *A Time for Youth*, showing young Ouyang Jing’s bi-sexual affairs, a sense of loss and confusion follow physical pleasure, which is similar to Liang Jin’s fallen life in 1990s Taiwan in *Good Men, Good Women*. In the 1990s, Taiwan had just experienced the lifting of martial law
and the KMT was still in power. Apart from people enjoying more freedom, Taiwan remained under KMT rule, though with a native President, Li Deng-hui. In 2005, Taiwan was ruled by President Chen Shui-bian, leader of the Democratic Progress Party (once the biggest opposition party). “Young and free” was a political slogan at this time. The DPP believed that people must enjoy freedom of speech, as in night-time political TV shows. *A Time for Youth* suggests that the ideology of the “young and free” in 1990s Taiwan was unsatisfactory.

At the Cannes Festival in 2005, Hou noted that nowadays young people in Taiwan tend to have physical intimacy very quickly, even before knowing each other well, that is, they tend to develop affection for each other after physical intimacy. He noted that this was very different from his generation. He felt that people’s relationships have become very complicated, which also reflects the chaotic situation of Taiwan at that time. Hou said that this was the reason why he wanted to shoot *The Time for Youth* in *Three Times*. In previous times, people were reserved. If youth is just an excuse for having a complicated triangular relationship, how might we reflect on the current political situation in Taiwan, which is inevitably tangled up with China, Japan, and the US? The triangular relationship and self-doubting identity in *A Time for Youth* also symbolises the cross-national identity of Taiwan, as the Taiwanese are ethnically and culturally Chinese but have been colonised or strongly influenced by Japan and the US. On the one hand, there are inevitable political influences from China, Japan and the US in Taiwan. On the other hand, there are the awareness of the decolonisation and *de*-Chineseness by the DPP. The decolonisation, the government’s control of cultural influence from these three countries and the search for a new identity best describe the internal situation in Taiwan. Meanwhile, Hou also indicates this playing-with-fire attempt—getting rid of the root— can be a kind of danger. It is reflected that in *A Time for Youth*.

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69 ibid.
Youth, Ouyang Jing is heartbroken after knowing her girlfriend’s suicide because of her infidelity.

Conclusion

History is always progressing and so are Hou’s films. In Hou’s previous works, such as *A City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, and *Good Men, Good Women*, he approached sensitive political issues through stories about women and families. But in his later work, *Three Times*, he subtly expressed his political and humanitarian concerns. Reading his films in regard to landscape and exterior space, we can sense that the political history is embodied through the use of a poetic style and indirectness. Meanwhile, interior space in Hou’s films shows the cultural transformation of Taiwan. Because of strict censorship, Hou must be indirect in his films. Not surprisingly, however, audiences “decode” his message, including his political concern. Hou is observant and through his lens he sets out what happened and what is happening in Taiwan. This enables the audience to connect the films to the social and political phenomena in Taiwan. Thus, they are able to reflect on the past, understand the present, and think about the future.
Conclusion

Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it (Marx).70

Everywhere I go I find a poet has been there before me (Freud).71

In 1989, Hou Hsiao-hsien turned over a new leaf for Taiwan’s film industry through his controversial film *A City of Sadness*, which was followed by *The Puppetmaster* and *Good Men, Good Women*. After this fundamental Taiwan-focused trilogy, Hou made a more sophisticated trilogy, *Three Times*, which focuses on women’s stories and underscores Taiwan’s social-cultural changes. This thesis has detailed how Hou has presented Taiwan’s history on screen, revisiting the hidden “skeleton in the closet,” namely the February 28 Incident and the White Terror aftermath. In *A City of Sadness*, Hou uses the Lin family’s tragedy in Keelung to portray the Incident indirectly on screen. From Liang Jing’s reinterpretation of Jiang Bi-yu in *Good Men, Good Women*, we feel sympathy for the victim’s family in the White Terror. From Li Tian-lu’s autobiography in *The Puppetmaster*, we gain insight into the fate of the Taiwanese being ruled by the Japanese and struggling to survive. In *Three Times*, three women’s stories represent three eras in Taiwan, the resistance to Japanese colonisation in *A Time for Freedom*, the pop culture influence from the US in the 1960s in *A Time for Love*, and the age of confusion after the DPP took power in *A Time for Youth*.

71 This is a caption on a wall of the Freud Museum in Vienna.
February 28, 2009 marked the sixty-second anniversary of the February 28 Incident and the twentieth anniversary of the making of *A City of Sadness*. Hou Hsiao-hsien, in a seminar hosted by the noted Taiwanese writer, Long Ying-tai, said that he hoped the truth could be restored as soon as possible (Chang & Wu, 2009). However, as time goes by, people’s memory grows less and less clear. How is it possible to restore the truth? What remains is just photography, written documents, and of course films.

From an analysis of several crucial film shots to a discussion of film technique related to the aesthetics of Chinese and Japanese film/culture and the representation of women in the depiction of history in the above-mentioned film texts, this thesis has discussed Hou’s presentation of culture, history, life and society throughout the twenty and early twenty-first centuries in Taiwan. In *A City of Sadness, The Puppetmaster* and *A Time for Freedom* in *Three Times*, Lin Wen-qing, Li Tian-lu and the geisha’s fate appropriately describe Taiwan’s situation in which people have so much to say but are not able to express their feelings in public, especially about politics. They can only comply, no matter which era it is. Hou, as a filmmaker, has experienced similar. Thus, he applied the Chinese aesthetics of indirectness in his films, in which the implications of “public” and “private” histories are interwoven and inseparable. With the use of this indirectness, Hou has achieved his goal in expressing his political agenda about Taiwan.

This thesis has shown how Hou has used the individual micro-history of family/women’s stories to represent the official macro-history, providing space for the audience to revisit, rethink, and reflect on crucial periods in Taiwan’s history. Through the films Hou explores the cultural, social, political and economic issues that culminated in antagonism between local Taiwanese and Taiwanese Mainlanders. In addition, he uses multiple languages in his films – Taiwanese, Japanese, Mandarin, Hakka, Shanghainese, and
Cantonese – to show the richness of Taiwanese culture, and the language barriers present in society at that time.

The thesis has also suggested that Hou’s cinematography is distinct from that of other film directors, as demonstrated by his use of transitional shots, long takes, interior space and poetic style. It is apparent that in this regard Hou has been strongly influenced by the period of Japanese colonisation more than fifty years ago. Through comparisons of Hou’s film style and aesthetics with Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Yasujiro Ozu, Tsai Ming-liang, Albert Lamorisse and Kenji Mizoguchi, we can see that Hou is distinctive and unique. I have also argued in the thesis that Hou’s cinematography leaves the February 28 Incident open to discussion. Instead of providing a true and accurate description of the historical events, Hou’s poetic style opens the film to interpretation. Through Hou’s detached cinematography, we can recognise the role he assumes of “being an impartial observer of life and death.” Through his distinctive film techniques Hou conveys his central message that life continues despite human grievances and misfortunes. Through the use of transitional shots of landscape, long takes and poetic space, Hou has developed his own unique style. In Good Men, Good Women, photographic realism provides another avenue through which to witness history. I have argued that, even if photography can be “tricky,” as Tessa Morris-Suzuki stated (2005), the value of the medium cannot be ignored in terms of its documentation of history. I have also suggested that through these various techniques, Hou attempts to use personal selective memories to represent history and to provide room for interpretation in The Puppetmaster and Good Men, Good Women.

The thesis has also suggested that Hou allows women to be part of history, through his use of the diaries and letters of Kuan-mei and her narration of circular history (which does not follow a chronological timeline). Revisiting Mizou’s (1991) and Emilie Yeh’s (2000) debate about the question “Can women really enter history?”, I have argued that women are
part of history. I have also suggested that Hou’s use of family story is not as simple as Nick Browne believes, and operates instead as a metaphor for the broader socio-political situation. Browne is unable to appreciate the beauty of indirectness in *The Puppetmaster*. The Chinese way of communicating – being indirect – has not only provided Hou with a platform to express his political concern about Taiwan in his films, but has also enabled him to be seen as a naturalist or humanist. Contrary to Mizou’s belief, Hou’s attitude toward history is to confront rather than avoid, because there are so many subtle messages embodied which need to be decoded for outsiders.

Regarding the argument about whether Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films are political or apolitical, based on my analysis of Hou’s background and his cinematic texts from the initial stage to the last decade, I did not believe the argument should not be limited to whether he is a supporter of KMT or DPP to make him “political.” Frankly speaking, Hou is being manipulative in his careful dealing with humanitarian issues and he uses the most sensitive topic, the February 28 Incident, to pave his way in the tough film industry in Taiwan. As long as there is a controversial topic, there is a market. Thus, Hou has succeeded in his tactical strategy and gone from being a filmmaker who barely makes ends meet to an internationally renowned film director. However, his rebellious nature, against the majority power, makes him stand out among most directors, who tend to comply. Even though Hou is political, this does not mean he does not make a contribution to Taiwan; he provides the audience with a platform to talk about the bitterness, share the trauma, accept the facts, seek a solution and move on.

Joining the debate between Mizou (1991) and Emilie Yeh (2000), I have argued that women are part of history in Hou’s films. Based on the *yin* and *yang* theory, we appreciate that the women’s/family’s stories are not only as important as the official history but they also co-exist. Family stories play an important role in Hou’s films. With the support of my family
stories and some valuable handwritten documents, I have argued that Hou’s films are credible in their narration of history. In order to understand Hou’s historical films, we must not simply focus on the micro-history; we must also take account of the macro-history. Because of the Chinese culture of indirectness and strict film censorship, the stories in Hou’s films insinuate a bigger scope of history in a subtle way. Hou uses women’s memory to illustrate history, which is intriguing and reliable. This argument is supported by the theory of national allegory.

The rise of Hou is based on political argument not only about his Taiwan trilogy but also about his life. Taking a step further, Hou uses women to illustrate his political concerns in history and uses his fame to seek a role in politics. Recently, he has been awarded the National Culture and Literature award in 2005 and the President’s Culture Award for his achievements and contribution to Taiwan’s film industry. Now Hou claims that he has two goals to achieve (Xiang, 2011). The first is to make a renewed and invigorated Chinese martial arts film (*Nie Yin Niang*). The other is to make a local black comedy. Much like the issue between the local Taiwanese and Taiwanese Mainlanders, Hou realises the important relationship between the people and the government: they need to know the importance of the goal in order to be reconciled and live together harmoniously.

The achievement of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films is not only in distinguishing between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese, it is also about the mutual understanding of each other’s difference and then thinking about how to live harmoniously in this lovely island. This is different from KMT’s cultural hegemony, which attempts to make everyone the same on the surface. It is also different from the DPP’s idea of de-Chineseness; Hou does not deny the fact that people on both sides of the Taiwan Straits share the same culture and have the same blood. His film shows respect for Chinese aesthetics. His cinema shows that we did have difficulty living together before but that does not mean we need to be troubled by this dilemma forever. The best way to solve the problem is not to hide it but to accept the
existence of it and deal with it. To reconcile and be harmonious is the message Hou attempts to send to the audience. With the family stories, this implication is not only applicable between Hokkien Taiwanese, Hakka Taiwanese, Aboriginal Taiwanese and Taiwanese Mainlanders or between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese in general, it is also applicable to the rest of the world, which is in need of peace, not polarisation or war. By saying that, Hou is not only political but also a humanist.

There are some limitations in my work. I have focused on Hou’s films after the launch of *A City of Sadness*, because the later films were made after the lifting of martial law, when Hou had more freedom in his artwork. My intention has been to examine this controversial director’s later films to determine whether he is political, as his previous films were restricted under a more strict censorship regime. Therefore, his films before the lifting of martial law like *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), *A Summer at Grandpa’s* (1984), *Dust in the Wind* (1986) and *Daughter of the Nile* (1987) are not covered in this thesis. Instead, this thesis has focused on Taiwan’s trilogy and the additional film, *Three Times*, to observe not only the evolution of Hou’s works but also the changes in Taiwan over the decades. I did not focus too much on the film techniques, as my main concern is the historical/political depictions in his films.

In conclusion, Hou’s cinematic texts I have examined are insightful and invaluable in terms of Taiwanese cinema and culture. For Taiwanese cinema, Hou’s philosophical thinking and poetic style not only encourage his local viewers to reflect on his meanings but also open a window internationally. Hou’s idea suggested in *A City of Sadness* is that through his film the people of Taiwan are able to cast away the darkness of the past and face a bright future because they have understood their history and taken a forgiving attitude towards past misfortunes. Through his sympathetic observation of the Lin family, who represent only a small slice of micro-history, Hou’s film helps to heal the wounds of Taiwan’s history and suggests that the city need not always be one of sadness but could perhaps become one of
hope. Finally, Hou has explained that the Chinese title of *Three Times* is called *Zui Hao de Shiguang*, meaning the best time. In his opinion, what we think of as the best is not necessarily the best – we just think so because we have lost it. By capturing the fragmented memories of women in cities in Taiwan, Hou truly provides a special kind of reading of Taiwanese (women’s) history as a threshold, which leads us to a different chapter in Taiwan’s film industry. If film is a kind of magic, with Hou’s magic wand, the best time can always be kept with us and never fade away.
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