A Zhong

Dir: Zhang Zuo-ji, 1996

A review by Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley and Gary D. Rawnsley, University of Nottingham, UK

The Taiwanese director Zhang Zuo-ji could not generate enough income to make his film *A Zhong* (*Zhong zai*). With money to cast only amateurs with little or no acting experience, Zhang decided to use people similar to the characters. Thus the central character, A Zhong, is a trainee in the folk act "Ba Jia Jiang" (Eight Family Generals); the actor cast in the role had also learned and performed the act. A Zhong's mother is an amateur comedy actress who has experience only in street performances; likewise the actress who plays her. The search for A Zhong's younger brother proved the most difficult. As this character is a retarded child, Zhang and his crew visited many special schools. However, since most parents who have children with disabilities in Taiwan are very withdrawn, Zhang was turned away numerous times. But one day he met a particular child at one of the special schools who showed both curiosity and friendliness, and his parents finally agreed to let Zhang cast him in his movie. Consequently A Zhong's brother, A Ji, has become one of the most delightful and unforgettable children in recent Taiwanese cinema. Moreover, Zhang was keen to cultivate the sense of "family" among his cast, and he thus arranged for them to live together for a month before shooting began. Such methods, some deliberate, most forced on the director by the lack of money, turn *A Zhong* into an extremely convincing and powerful story. The realistic approach creates a sense of intimacy between film and audience, and has a distinct documentary feel. Indeed, *A Zhong* has given new meaning to the "docudrama" genre.

The story focuses on a senior high school graduate, A Zhong, and his dysfunctional family, including his grandfather, mother, a sister who is not blood related, and a younger brother. A Zhong's mother separated from his father a long time ago because he once got drunk and raped A Zhong's sister. However, even though many years have passed since their separation, they are not divorced. A Zhong is portrayed as an angry and rebellious youth, but the constant bickering disguises the fact that he is capable of expressing much love for his family to whom he remains loyal. For example, at the outset of the story, A Zhong (a pet name) changes his name from Liu Wei-zhong (following his father's surname) to Yang Wei-zhong (i.e. his mother's surname) upon his grandfather's request. A Zhong complains loudly because he knows he will be subject to much teasing from his peers: his new name, Yang Wei-zhong, sounds exactly like the Chinese for "being impotent". But the change of name means so much to his grandfather, so A Zhong reluctantly accepts.

Under subtle emotional pressure from his mother A Zhong begins to learn "Ba Jia Jiang". This is a kind of religious act that is restricted to men. After a period of special training, the chosen few will supposedly be able to establish a link with the spirit world. Their performance involves self-mutilation using a wide range of terrifying weapons to torture themselves, although they allegedly do not feel the pain because they are possessed by spirits. "Ba Jia Jiang" thus symbolises a selfless act in that humans are willing to sacrifice

themselves in order to please the gods. A Zhong's mother believes that if her son can learn to perform "Ba Jia Jiang" well, their family will be blessed.

The problem, however, is that "Ba Jia Jiang" groups have tended to become entangled with gangsters. A Zhong's group is no exception. A quarrel with a rival gang leaves his sister and her boyfriend seriously injured. The family's problems are only just beginning: A Zhong's grandfather takes A Zhong to his home town where the ancestors of the Yang family are buried. The grandfather dies that night. A Zhong's mother refuses to sell her land to a local consortium with government connections, putting her in constant battle with her neighbours and the local authorities. A Zhong's father blames A Zhong for all that has happened. During a fierce verbal conflict with the father, A Zhong tells his father that what he did to his sister was a horrible crime and then breaks beer bottles on his own face until blood streams down. At this moment, it is as if the spirit of "Ba Jia Jiang" has come alive in A Zhong. We do not see the father's face, but the complex feelings of guilt, shame, pain and sorrow beam through the screen.

Nevertheless, A Zhong's mother believes that these misfortunes are due to A Zhong's reluctance to apply himself to the art of "Ba Jia Jiang", so finally he drops out to assume a merely minor role in the performance. Despite this, life does go on and the family survives. The film depicts how ordinary people deal with their misfortunes to the best of their ability, and seek their happiness within the intimacy of the family, learning to enjoy and appreciate what they have.

This film discusses the culture and the strength of the under-class in Taiwan, which has been either neglected or overly romanticised by other directors. It reminds us of the early movies of Taiwan's most acclaimed director, Hou Hsiao-hsien, especially gems like *The Boys from Fengkuei* (*Feng-guei Lai-de Ren*, 1983). Nevertheless, while Hou's movies lack strong female characters, *A Zhong* gives us a powerful and resilient mother character. This alone means that Zhang Zuo-ji can stand outside the shadow of Hou and make movies that are in a class of their own.

If one looks at the four contemporary Taiwanese films shown in February 2001 at the University of Nottingham as part of its Asian Film Festival - *A Zhong* (1996), *Murmur of Youth* (1997), *Buddha Blessed America* (1996), and *Tropical Fish* (1995) one is astonished to find a sense of improvisation in all of them. Of course, there are different levels of improvisation, with *A Zhong* having the strongest and most distinctive quality. Perhaps this is a trend developing in Taiwanese cinema that is worth further observation.

Across a Gold Prairie

Dir: Isshin Inudo, 1999

A review by Sachiko Shikoda, University of Nottingham, UK

Ayumu Nippori is an eighty year old man with a serious heart condition which has confined him to his house for nearly sixty years. Narisu is eighteen and Ayumu's newly assigned care worker. One morning Ayumu wakes up believing he is twenty. As soon as he sees Narisu, who resembles the girl he was once fascinated by, he mistakes her for his "Madonna." In order to come to terms with this inexplicable situation, Ayumu makes himself believe that what he is now experiencing is a happy dream. For her part, Narisu is struggling to deal with her secret love for her stepbrother. When she confesses that she is heartbroken, Ayumu, in an attempt to cheer her up, tries to call as many of his friends as he can think of, only to find out that they have all been dead for many years. Thus does reality fail to keep up with Ayumu's "dream." However, Ayumu soon discovers the chronicle of his life he had kept for sixty years in case he ever lost his memory. Learning that he is in fact eighty years old and not twenty, Ayumu becomes terribly confused, and he decides to see whether his "happy dream" is a reality or not.

The above synopsis may sound too odd to make for a convincing film, yet *Across a Gold Prairie* (*Kimpatsu no sougen*) is both touching and accomplished. The movie was written and directed by Isshin Inudo, a former director of television commercials whose work for VISA International was represented at the 1995 New York Advertisement Festival. Inudo's first feature film *Two People Talking* (1995) won him the Grand Prix at the Sundance Film Festival in Tokyo, and a 1996 Directors' Guild of Japan Newcomer Award. *Across a Gold Prairie*, his second feature, has been screened at the Berlin Film Festival, the Swiss Film Festival, and at the Tokyo International Film Festival. It was also awarded the Grand Prix at the Yuubari International Fantastic Film Festival in Japan.

Following his short film *Red Watermelon, Yellow Watermelon* (1982), *Across a Gold Prairie* is Inudo's second adaptation from *shojo manga*, or the subgenre of Japanese comics known as "girls' cartoons." The Manga industry constitutes one of the most flourishing forms of popular culture in contemporary Japan, with various categories - boys, girls, ladies, salarymen's - catering for both child and adult readerships. Within these categories, manga is further divided into various genres such as sci-fi drama, historical romance, warrior adventure, and college narratives. According to the 1997 edition of the *Annual Report of Publishing Indicators*, the circulation in 1996 of the most popular *shojo manga*, *Ribbon* (a monthly magazine that targets middle-high school girls) was a staggering 1,750,000, while *You* monthly, which caters to women between the ages of twenty one and thirty one, sold 500,000 copies in the same year. Under these circumstance, cartoonists are often treated as celebrities. Certainly, the creator of the print version of *Across a Gold Prairie*, Yumiko Oshima, is one of the most successful women in the Japanese manga industry. Her works are known particularly for their illuminating depictions of pre-adolescent women's psychology, and five of them have been adapted into films since 1982 - the others being *Red Watermelon, Yellow*

Watermelon, *The Star-Country of Cotton* (from "Wata no kuni hoshi") an animated film by Shin-ichi Tsuji (1984), *April Ghost Story* ("Shigatsu Kaidan" by Kazuya Konaka, (1988), and *Everyday is Summer Holiday* ("Mainichi ga Natsuyasumi") by Shusuke Kaneko.

The overall tone of *Across a Gold Prairie* is one of fantasy, and this clearly owes much to the influence of the comic book form. The almost surreal central plot line intertwines with other curiously placed episodes. It is only very subtly evoked that Narisu has had a "sweetheart", and thus when she tells Ayumu that she is heartbroken it comes as something of a surprise. Similarly, the relationship between Ayumu and the rather brattish little neighbour who frequents his house, Tomomi, is mystifying. The presence of Tomomi's geeky violin tutor is also comically uncanny, but it later turns unsettling when he starts beating a street sign that reads "Watch out for Perverts!" (a common sign often found in residential districts all over Japan) with a baseball bat.

The film successfully conveys the poignancy of the main characters' psychologies. Inudo chose twenty four year-old Yusuke Iseya, who also appears in *After Life* (Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1999), to play the eighty year old protagonist. Iseya is brilliantly graceful in portraying this character's delighted, and at the same time, confused state of mind. His reserved style of acting is highly appropriate and manages to convince us that Ayumu was the frail son of a well-to-do family in Japan's "good and old days." Through use of the European-influenced decor of the house and Ayumu's clothes, the film aims to evoke an early twentieth century atmosphere, although the suggested time period is left unspecified. As a result, the ambience of the imagined past seems to be employed so as to enhance the absurdly large age gap between the two protagonists.

Chizuru Ikewaki's Narisu, moreover, draws an interesting portrait of contemporary Japanese womanhood. After having secretly quit university, Narisu lives an independent life in Tokyo. Due to the nature of her work, she inevitably appears rather domesticated, yet she is stoically determined as a professional careworker. In the evenings she goes out with her friends, gets hideously drunk, and has a one night stand as well. When criticised by her friends for her decision to marry Ayumu, Narisu sounds rather passive, as if she is trapped in the traditional view of marriage from a totally dependent female point of view: "If you insist on stopping me from marrying him, will you make me happy then?," she says. Yet it must be noted that this is still a not entirely uncommon attitude among young Japanese women. Indeed, Ikewaki's Narisu manages to keep a distance from the cliched image of the demure and subservient Japanese woman found even today in such recent works such as Shohei Imamura's *The Eel* (1996).

The use of cinematography in *Across a Gold Prairie* also contributes to the overall tone of the film. Director of Photography Taku Murakami has worked predominantly on television commercials as well as music videos for a number of Japanese pop singers. His camerawork captures the serene atmosphere of the world as filtered through Ayumu's perspective and consciousness as he believes himself to be dreaming. As the scope of Ayumu's action is limited within the house, the mise-en-scene -- comprising, for example, antique Japanese-style "European" furniture placed in off-white walled rooms, as well as a "traditional" Japanese room with a veranda -- evokes the sense of a distant past and thus enhances the other-worldly quality of the narrative. Such images make for a striking contrast with Narisu's experiences in the exterior world and bustling town centre. Moreover, the influence of the indigenous Japanese film industry can be found everywhere in the film's aesthetics. Shots of characters (Ayumu, his old friend Kanzaki and his wife) sitting on the veranda seen from

both inside the house and outside in the garden locate this surreal film within a specifically Japanese context by evoking scenes from the work of Yasujiro Ozu. In addition, abruptly inserted close ups of sunflowers against a backdrop of blue sky dotted with soaring clouds, might remind viewers of the cryptic drawings that punctuate Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-Bi* (1997).

Ah Kam

Dir: Ann Hui, 1996

A review by Andrew Willis, University of Salford, UK

The shooting of Ann Hui's *Ah Kam* (*A Jin*) was interrupted by an on-set accident involving its star Michelle Yeoh. During a key stunt, which included a jump from a bridge, Yeoh landed awkwardly, seriously hurting herself. The result was that the film had to be drastically rewritten to accommodate the performer's restricted availability. In an interview with *Thunder*, a magazine devoted to action movies, Yeoh recalled that, "the jump was only eighteen feet and I was to land on some cardboard boxes and a mattress. Instead, I landed on my head, and even though it was a short jump, the force made me land like a ton of bricks. When I landed, my head went back and I was very lucky that my neck didn't snap." The aftermath of the accident, and the crew's obvious concern, is shown under the final credits as Yeoh is carefully moved by the other stunt performers, clearly stunned and in some pain. The disruption to the shoot, in particular Yeoh's inability to perform her own stunts later, clearly seems to have had a negative impact upon the final film, which appears more than a little disjointed.

This is a great pity, as the potential for *Ah Kam* to be a great film is obvious. The focus of the film is a woman, the Ah Kam of the title, and the film's structure reflects three important elements in her life. Split into three sections, each tells part of her story. The first, and most impressive, section sees her arrive on the set of a Hong Kong movie looking for work with the stunt crew. The stuntmen are led by their chief, Tung, played by real-life fight choreographer, action performer and director, Sammo Hung. In the second section Ah Kam leaves the stunt crew, who have become her surrogate family, having fallen in love with a bar owner, Sam. He takes her to the Chinese mainland where he has opened a new bar. The third and final section focuses on her relationship with Tung's son and their escape from a vengeful group of Triads. One of the problems with the film is that the second and third sections do not match the energy and engagement of the first.

The opening section offers a number of interesting perspectives on the Hong Kong film industry, the people who work in it, and the conditions that they have to put up with. The Hong Kong film industry is represented as very cut-throat; no one is confident about their on-going employment and the stunt crew are continually under pressure to work fast and cut as many corners as possible. Ironically, in the first section we are shown this in the way that the safety of the stunt performers is continually put at risk by cost-cutting producers and jealous actors. This part of the film also clearly shows the influence of organised crime within the Hong Kong film industry, and the power they have to influence the on-set decisions made by the so-called creative personnel. All of the outside influences and disruptions make the stunt team a closer unit, they look after each other all the time and have an undying loyalty to their chief.

Ann Hui is seen by many writers as a key member of the post-1979 Hong Kong "New Wave," and *Ah Kam* certainly fits into her body of work. As Stephen Teo observes, her films

are often "about women who must live up to and justify their roles in a system wrought by tradition" (Teo, 1997: 212). Indeed, Ah Kam finds a place in the stunt crew because she proves through her actions that she is the equal of the male members of the team. She is the only female member of Tung's outfit and is taken into their circle due to her actions on the film set. She further proves her worth when Tung is beaten up and hospitalised. Ah Kam takes over as choreographer, saving the team from unemployment while Tung recovers. With his blessing she takes over and performs a very dangerous stunt which is too much for anyone else in the group. On set, then, Ah Kam is respected on merit. However, in the second section, when she joins Sam at his bar, things are very different. She looks uncomfortable and restricted in the role of the owner's wife, simply looking attractive and serving drinks. Here respect cannot be earned and the social traditions that restrict women's roles work against her. This is effectively shown when she beats up a gangster demanding protection money. Rather than praise her actions, Sam tells her that this is totally unacceptable behaviour in this world. This, and the fact that Sam embarks on an affair with another woman, leads her back to the stunt team. As Teo suggests in the above quote, she is not able to break free of the traditional gender roles that operate in the wider society.

This has the effect of positing Tung's stunt team as an ideal and idealistic group, one where respect can be earned through actions rather than tradition, in effect where everyone is equal on merit, apart of course from Tung himself. He and his team are represented as being outside the modern corrupting influences of capitalism, in particular the vulgar capitalism of the gangsters. Dishonesty, corruption and greed are shown to be the dangerous and negative influences that exist outside the world of the stunt team and their more collaborative existence and interdependence. The film's first section, '"Ah Kam," is an exploration of these positive values. The second, "Sam", shows an alternative set of values, but ones that are not to be admired. The third section, "Ah Long", named after Tung's son, represents the future and the struggle against the corrupting values of the gangsters and Ah Kam's attempts to instil in the boy the values she learnt from his father. As such the film, through the character of Ah Kam, is an exploration of the conflicting ideas and ideals that exist as Hong Kong moved towards the change over from British to Chinese rule. Whilst not a complete success, in part due to the imbalance of the three sections, *Ah Kam* remains an ambitious and interesting film. Certainly, it captures the cut-throat world of the Hong Kong film industry brilliantly in the first section. At the end one is left wondering if it may have been more successful had Michelle Yeoh not been injured. Yet, as always in such circumstances, the footage of the accident and its aftermath is horribly compelling.

References:

Teo, Stephen (1997) *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. London: British Film Institute.

Buddha Blessed America

Dir: Wu Nien-chen, 1996

A review by Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley and Gary D. Rawnsley, University of Nottingham, UK

For audiences familiar with modern Taiwanese cinema, Wu Nien-chen is one of the few names to have achieved "Godfather" status. During his early years at Central Motion Picture Corporation (the oldest and most prominent movie company in Taiwan), Wu made a significant contribution to the so-called "New Taiwanese Cinema Campaign." Many of his scripts, including those for *City of Sadness* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989) and *Dust in the Wind* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1996), are still revered by audiences of different generations. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Wu Nien-chen decided to try his hand at directing movies instead of just writing them, he attracted the attention of critics and audiences around the world.

Buddha Blessed America (*Tai-ping Tien-guo*) is Wu's second movie as director. The film is set in the 1960s, at the height of U.S. involvement in Taiwan, when troops and military advisors flooded onto the island. The Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan and the U.S. may have been very close because of their shared interest in containing communism, but relations between the two have never been easy. As Simon Long has observed:

> In the 1950s, the ROC relied on the US for its very survival as an independent entity. How successful a communist invasion of Taiwan in 1950 would have been is unknowable. But it is improbable that, without US military backing, Taiwan could have survived the sporadic outbursts of patriotic fervour on the mainland over the next two decades...But this dependence on the US should not mask a deep sentiment of betrayal in Taiwan about the US attitude. Twice, the people on Taiwan feel they have been stabbed in the back by the power whose battles they thought they were fighting. First, in the late 1940s, the US backing for the savage imposition of KMT [Kuomintang] rule on the island was seen as a betrayal by those Taiwanese who, having suffered Japanese colonialism, thought that the United States, the strongest power in the world, might help them win the right to self-determination, or at least to freedom from arbitrary and despotic rule. Second, when Kissinger and Nixon went to Peking in 1971-2, and then President Carter switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Peking in December 1978, all sectors of society in Taiwan felt let down. (Long, 1991: 130-131)

On the surface, *Buddha Blessed America* reflects the sense of confusion that characterised relations between Taiwan and the United States. The movie tells the simple story of how a group of villagers try to adapt when the KMT government assigns their homes to American soldiers as temporary accommodation, and how they try to readjust when the troops finally leave. But below the surface we can sense Wu's strong love-hate relationship with America, especially through the depiction of the main character (played by the acclaimed movie

director of the new generation, Lin Cheng-sheng.) On one hand, the U.S. is adored for its modernity, technology, apparent democratic system and life style. For the villagers, the U.S. is a source of inspiration. It represents an ideal and a desire for progression. But in reality, the arrival of the U.S. army turns the lives of the villagers upside down. While the soldiers try to express their desire for friendship with the villagers, the KMT interpreter assigned to them manages to mistranslate all important messages, leaving the villagers humiliated and scared. In other words, Wu appears to resent the KMT regime more than the U.S.!

If one were to compare *Buddha Blessed America* with movies made by the new generation of directors -- for example, *Murmur of Youth* (Lin Cheng-sheng, 1997) and *Tropical Fish* (Chen Yu-shun, 1995) - one would discover a number of differences. For example, while filmmakers from the 1980s tended to set issues against the backdrop of political, social and historical events, those of the 1990s seem to be more interested in exploring current personal experiences and intimate feelings. The consolidation of democracy in Taiwan has influenced the younger generation of filmmakers who have now turned their attention to depicting and representing every aspect of their daily lives. Taiwanese filmmaking of the 1990s has begun to deal with themes from a more contemporary and intimate perspective, and has resisted the simple pursuit of social or political agendas. Hence, *Buddha Blessed America* may be described as a movie of the mid-1990s with the mentality of the mid-1980s. It contains all the elements of a "masterpiece," such as impressive cinematography, superb acting, refined narrative skills, and themes of key historical significance, but it lacks a sense of involvement. As a result, audiences remain detached from the characters throughout the movie and find it difficult to be moved by the story.

One of Wu Nien-chen's biggest talents is his ability to transform personal experiences into something universal, which is what lends *City of Sadness* and *Dust in the Wind* part of their great appeal. It is said that his debut as a movie director, *A Borrowed Life* (1993), which concerns a character based on Wu's own father, has achieved the same level of success as his other films because of this. Consider the fact, for example, that American director Martin Scorsese was so moved by *A Borrowed Life* that he contacted Wu as soon as he saw the film to tell him that he intended to keep a copy for his own personal collection. In the summer of 2000, when we contacted Wu's office in Taipei in an attempt to purchase a copy of the English-language version of the same film, we were told that Scorsese possessed the only copy.

Both *A Borrowed Life* and *Buddha Blessed America* were produced with the backing of a variety of different companies. When these companies fragmented, the ownership of copyright on the films became so contentious that at the time of writing no one has any clear idea of what belongs to whom. As a result of this muddled situation everyone, including the filmmakers and their audiences, lose out since good movies are unable to be shown, especially in overseas markets. In other words, vague copyright laws remains one of the most serious impediments to the growth and international circulation of the products of the contemporary Taiwan film industry.

References:

Long, Simon (1991) *Taiwan: China's Last Frontier*. London: Macmillan.

Dandelion

Dir: Kyeongsoon Lee & Dongha Choi-ha, 1999

A review by Sanghee Lee, Pusan, South Korea

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, student and worker democracy movements were widespread throughout South Korea. Under forceful oppression by the military government, many young people died: some committed suicide in public while advocating democracy for the country; some were tortured to death in the sealed office of the National Secret Agency; others were drafted into the army and went missing or turned up dead. *Dandelion* (*Mindullae*) is a documentary about a number of parents who saw their children die at the hands of the Korean military government during this time. While the military government had long been in the habit of labelling activist youth as rebellious, the families of the bereaved formed the "Yugahup" (National Council of Bereaved Families Democracy) in 1986, through which they fought to restore their children's honour, and for democracy.

When Kim Daejung assumed the presidency in the winter of 1998, it was hoped that he would be a President for human rights. The members of Yugahup started to camp out in front of the National Assembly, requesting special laws on the "Restoration of Martyrs' Honour" and an "Inquiry into the Truth of Doubtful Deaths". No one was sure how long the demonstrations would have to last. *Dandelion* chronicles the course of their fight, from June 1988 until the National Assembly finally passed these two bills in October 1999.

Like other independent documentaries, Kyeongsoon Lee and Dongha Choi-ha's film was shot on a low-budget. Its virtue is its objectivity. The filmmakers occasionally provide spoken commentary, suggesting a more active and subjective involvement in their material. However, this is very different from the interview-style documentary. Early on, the directors discuss the title of the film with a few of the parents in Yugahup. The latter suggest "the lives of the parents" as an appropriate title, instead of "the sorrow of the parents". The filmmakers move their viewfinder around the parents while listening to them, revealing how these people feel about their political lives. By such means, *Dandelion* highlights the parents' ordinary daily lives, not just their roles as courageous activists.

It is clear that the parents are tired of their fighting and their sadness. However, on the other hand, they remain very committed to fulfilling their children's wishes, and they still believe that their wishes will come true. They remark that "I scolded my son (or daughter) when he/she joined the democratic movement. I was thinking of my own sake. Yet, I know now what my child stood for."

The film documents Yagahup's fund-raising activities, committee meetings and demonstrations in front of the National Assembly during the course of an entire winter. The parents are shown sleeping in a frozen street covered only in blankets. Even though they are not able to prepare proper meals and the passers-by do not listen to them, they still occupy the street. One day, the government offers to establish a special law on the "Restoration of Martyrs' Honour", on condition that they put a stop to the demonstrations. The parents meet

to decide whether or not to accept this offer. This results in tension between the members. During the meeting, the difficulties associated with the holding of ongoing public street demonstrations are discussed in detail. However, some members remain silent: they know that were they to accept the offer their children's doubtful deaths would probably never be investigated. Eventually, this internal tension ends when the President of Yugahup, Eunshim Bae, asks Bonggyu Choi, father of the late U-Hyuk Choi, his opinion regarding the offer. Due to the fact that his son had died after being drafted into the military, Bonggyu Choi could not answer this question, but only hold back his tears.

The title, *Dandelion*, does not just refer to a flower, but also to the Korean people's spirit for independence since the Japanese colonial period. In the words of the title song, "Mindullae," a *Dandelion* is something still alive, "with fighting spirit in its heart in the harsh and cruel land, calling for the spring of independence" even though it is "stepped on by many". However, I do not intend to dwell on the issue of the social and political situation in Korea, In fact, Korea has already passed through the plight of dictatorship, although many unsolved problems remain today. While this is a shameful history, it is not the only history to be remembered. As with the case of other countries which have passed through traumatic eras, deeply rooted scars lay in people's hearts. In other words, it is the parents who hold the interest in this documentary. I believe that this is a film about life rather than death; it is a documentary on the lives of a number of parents rather than the tragic death of youth. The parents dedicate their lives to the life of their children. They then sacrifice the rest of their lives to restoring their children's honour, and to working for democracy, after they have been killed.

Speaking personally, it was terribly difficult to write a review of this powerful documentary. Indeed, I had avoided watching it again, as the sorrow of *Dandelion* remained with me after first viewing this film two years ago at the Pusan International Film Festival. It would be difficult for a non-Korean to watch this film without emotional involvement. For Koreans, especially those in their thirties, it is impossible to remain objective - they experienced this historical moment for themselves. The film reminds us of what we have forgotten, and furthermore, of how much we have forgotten the very people we are most indebted to.

The parents feel guilty when they laugh and they feel guilty when they are happy. During the Head Shaving Ceremony, wherein they request the passing of the two bills, the "Restoration of Martyrs' Honour" and the "Inquiry into the Truth of Doubtful Deaths", they are seen crying and saying to themselves, "Why should we live like this? Why should we?" Indeed, no one can live out another's burden: we call one who tries a Saint. I hope the parents do not live the life of a Saint, and that they can laugh without feeling guilty. I hope that they can smile with happiness, that they do not feel afraid of being happy. However, most of all, I hope that they can live their own lives, and not anyone else's life.

Despite the moments of resentment which are evident throughout the film, *Dandelion* documents the parents' wish to create a world where no one oppresses another because of different beliefs. It is important to remember that this world will never exist if we forget what happened in the past.

Translated by Jeongmee Kim.

East Palace, West Palace

Dir: Zhang Yuan, 1997

A review by Jeongmee Kim, University of Nottingham, UK

East Palace, West Palace is a love story. A man loves another man in secret, yet one night is finally able to confess his love to this other man. The film takes place across the course of this one night. As with every case of unrequited love, nothing can help the love be completed.

A-Lan (Si Han) is a gay writer. He regularly goes to the Bei-Hai Park, known as a place for gay men, to find friends or lovers. Every night in the park, policemen try to arrest the gay men and the gay men try to run away. It is not illegal to be homosexual in China but homosexuality is still socially unacceptable.

One night, A-Lan is caught by the police, and meets the policeman, Shi (Hu Jun), whom he has fallen in love with. When Shi is taking A-Lan to the police station, A-Lan suddenly kisses him and then runs away. A few nights later, Shi finds A-Lan making love with another man in the park. Shi catches A-Lan and takes him to the police station for interrogation. Shi questions A-Lan through the night, asking him about his gay lifestyle in an attempt to shame and "cure" him.

As A-Lan talks about his childhood and previous loves, his story is juxtaposed with a Beijing Opera about an innocent girl who sacrifices herself for her lover. The girl in the Beijing Opera symbolises A-Lan and the way of his love. Moreover, A-Lan's story about his childhood and previous loves blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality. Just as Beijing Opera is fantasy because it is fictional drama, A-Lan's personal history is a form of fantasy because gay life is deemed unacceptable in China. Significantly, in terms of film style, both are represented in a similar fashion. (Indeed, director Zhang Yuan originally wrote the script of *East Palace, West Palace* for the stage.) The illusionary lighting of A-Lan's flashback accentuates a visionary atmosphere. A-Lan's flashback is shown in over-exposed lighting with symbolic voice-over. The apparently dramatic story of the Beijing Opera often intrudes into A-Lan's story and helps blur the lines between reality and A-Lan's fantasy. When A-Lan starts to get swept up by his world and by his recollections, Shi shouts out to him, "Have you forgotten where you are? You're getting out of line." Shi tries to remind A-Lan where he is. For Shi, A-Lan's world is obviously fantasy. Shi's reaction clearly shows that, for him, the space which he is in *is* reality, whereas for A-Lan, the material world does not represent *his* world, since this is a space which does not permit his gay life. Hence, A-Lan's fantasy world contrasts with the scenes in the police station which represent the "real." In terms of style, then, the police station is presented in less expressionist lighting so as to mark it visible distinction from both A-Lan's fantasy world and the world of the Beijing Opera.

After listening to A-Lan's story, Shi lets him go; A-Lan wants to stay, but Shi forces him to go. However, A-Lan cannot leave the office and so he hangs around because he has one more thing to say, the thing he is most desperate to say that night. Having found A-Lan still around

the office, Shi shouts at him to leave. From this close-up of Shi, the camera cuts to a medium shot of the small and vulnerable A-Lan. It then slowly moves up to A-Lan - still in medium shot who finally spells out "I love you." At the moment A-Lan finally confesses his love in front of his lover, he looks very weak. Everyone in love is always weak rather than strong because of his/her love. They are even weaker when they know that their love is unrequited.

This particular scene from *East Palace, West Palace* shows how much emotional flow a seemingly highly static scene can bring. When the camera moves up to the small and vulnerable A-Lan, the soreness of A-Lan's love overflows on the screen. The scene is emotionally overpowering precisely because A-Lan's love happens in this "real" space. From this moment on, A-Lan's fantasy occurs not in his own fantasy world, but in the real world with Shi - thus the fantasy becomes reality. As the distinction between fantasy and reality cannot exist anymore, the meaning of both are subverted. Moreover, because Zhang Yuan deploys a restrained cinematic style, as opposed to the previous, more illuminated lighting on A-Lan, it can be said that although this shift to realism is unexpected, it illustrates very clearly how A-Lan's fantasy world now emerges out into the real world.

It is worth noting the origin of the phrase "East Palace, West Palace" (ostensibly taken from the gay slang for two public toilets in Beijing.) In ancient China, the king could have a number of concubines. They lived together in the king's huge palace together with his legitimate wife, the queen. The king's most beloved concubine was allocated the west palace while the queen lived in the east palace. Only the king could dwell in the south and north palaces. Applying this to the film, we might say that the police office is equivalent to the queen in her east palace. Conversely, the park represents the west palace of the beloved concubine. A-Lan belongs to the west palace. He is fully in love and yet his love can never be deemed legitimate. Shi belongs to the east palace; he is legitimate but can never be fully loved. Both reside in different palaces under the rule of the king. As he has power because of his social legitimacy, Shi tries to oppress A-Lan. However, when Shi realises his feelings of love towards A-Lan, he also recognises that this legitimacy places a burden on his life as well as on A-Lan's. From this point on, the balance between Shi and A-Lan as socially legitimate and illegitimate, respectively, has been upset.

With the confession scene the well-balanced emotional tensions between A-Lan and Shi become twisted. Up to this point, Shi has denied A-Lan's world. Now he cannot resist his emotional involvement with A-Lan anymore. The film rushes towards its climax, showing Shi's turmoil. However, this narrative movement necessitates a reconsideration of exactly whose dilemma is being spread out across the film's plot. At first, it seems that A-Lan is the focus, yet the longer the interrogation goes on, the more Shi's dilemma is foregrounded. Shi has to face the question of whether or not he should accept A-Lan's world. For Shi, A-Lan's world is fantasy, as it cannot be socially legitimate. At the same time, Shi cannot deny the reality of this world because he feels love for A-Lan. At the end of the film, A-Lan says to Shi, "You have asked me many things tonight. Why not ask yourself?"

Zhang Yuan acknowledges that he had a strong personal investment in *East Palace, West Palace*. As such, he appears to give an answer on behalf of Shi - even though Zhang's status as a filmmaker in China is closer to A-Lan's status in the film than to Shi's. Chris Berry (Berry, 1998) provides a discussion of how the private discourse of gay life in Zhang's film relates to the wider political and economical situation in China, particularly in light of Zhang's marginality as an independent filmmaker and his earlier (banned) work on ethnic minority groups, namely *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing Za Zhong*, 1993) and *Sons* (*Erzi*, 1996).

Zhang still works in China, but gets financial support from elsewhere. *East Palace, West Palace* was financed and distributed by a French company and is banned in China.

After A-Lan spells out his love to Shi, the latter forces A-Lan to wear women's clothes and then takes him back to his office. A-Lan resists at first but eventually gives in because that is what Shi wants from him. However, Shi cannot bear to look at A-Lan as a transversite; it seems that Shi knows that that is not what A-Lan is. Shi takes A-Lan out of the police station and drags him around the park. After an aimless and chaotic struggle, Shi leaves A-Lan alone and walks back to the office at dawn. As Shi turns his back on A-Lan and walks away from the camera, the background scenery resembles a huge king's palace, as if disclosing that no one can leave this place regardless of whether they live in the east palace or the west palace. However, the fact that Zhang is still working in China and making Chinese films should not make for a hopeless conclusion. With this film, Zhang appears to be saying, "I'm still living in the king's palace because I still love my king. I belong to the king whether I'm loved or not."

References:

Berry, Chris (1998) Staging Gay Life in China: *East Palace, West Palace*, *Jump Cut* 42 (December), pp. 84-89.

Floating Life

Dir: Clara Law, 1996

A review by Hsiao-Pin Chang, The University of Nottingham, UK

Australia's first foreign-language feature film, *Floating Life* concerns the emotional life of Hong Kong immigrants. It offers a detailed depiction of the anxiety, fear, sorrow and sense of contradiction experienced by those adrift in a new country. The film is set in 1997, at the crucial moment when the mainland Chinese government is set to resume sovereign control over Hong Kong. Director Clara Law is adept at tackling such issues, as can be seen in particular in one of her previous works, *Farewell China* (1990), an account of the life of Chinese people in the United States. In her Asian immigration films, Law focuses on the difficulties involved with transplanting to a totally different society and community. In *Floating Life*, there are not only cultural conflicts between eastern and western societies, but also the conflicts and generation gaps between family members, and most important of all, Hong Kong people's sense of national identity.

The story of this film is set just before Hong Kong prepares to be returned to the Chinese government. A couple decide to take their two young sons to Australia to live with their second daughter, Bing. However, because Bing is overly self-protective, none of the family members can bear her behavior. The family's oldest daughter lives in Germany and has borne a family with a German man, but she harbors strong feelings of guilt for not fulfilling her responsibilities to her Chinese family, as she is the oldest child. Meanwhile, the oldest son, Ka Ming, is not keen to become an Australian, so he stays alone in Hong Kong, worrying about his future. Although he is the oldest son (but not the oldest child), Ka Ming does not have responsibility for taking care of the whole family, In the end, though, he decides to go to Australia so as to be with them.

The family depicted in *Floating Life* represent differing attitudes towards immigration among different generations of Hong Kong society. In the film, some people believe that by living in a foreign country they can pursue a better life and have a wonderful family environment - they do not appear worried by national political issues, as if they feel that they will no longer need to live with fear once they emigrate. However, others appear to simply not care about such issues, as reflected in the character of Ka Ming. Such people feel that Hong Kong lost its roots and identity the day it became a British colony. People such as Ka Ming consider that because they are already living in a foreign country, living elsewhere would be no different. This then is the main issue of the film: identity. At this particular point in its history, many Hong Kong people do not seem to know exactly what kind of identity to believe in, and diverse attitudes exist throughout society. As such, the family in Law's film may be taken to epitomize Hong Kong society as a whole.

For example, the situation of the oldest daughter in the film illustrates this point very well. During one scene with her husband, she says that she is Chinese, yet she cannot speak any Mandarin; that she lives in Germany, yet she is not German. Though she identifies herself as

Chinese, Chinese society does not accept her, while she also realizes that she does not fit into the German culture and community. Such is the dilemma faced by every immigrant from Hong Kong. And yet even given such frustration, and the sense of contradiction lived by immigrants on a daily basis, many Hong Kong émigrés appear reluctant to return "home" to China. Perhaps feeling abandoned by both China and Britain, such people want to taste a relaxing life and live in a better environment. (Certainly, this is the fairy tale built up by those western countries which need the industrious working attitude and resources of Hong Kong immigrants to develop their own economies.) In *Floating Life*, then, people from Hong Kong are like a tree without roots; they are drifting everywhere, trying to find a place to belong. By the end of the film, the mother says to the ancestors that even though her family has flown halfway around the world to settle in Australia - a supposed paradise on earth - why are we not as happy as we should be? It is very difficult to try and put down roots in a different society and culture - this is the main factor that causes the family's unhappiness. For instance, Bing tries extremely hard to become an Australian, but her behavior becomes very westernized, and she suffers under the heaviest of family burdens.

Through such thematic material, Law questions and redefines the meanings of "house" and "home." By representing the different houses occupied in different places by various family members, she explores the traditional Chinese concept of family union. Even though family members live far away from one another, they still hope to one day be able to live together. Moreover, she depicts what is as an ironic result of British colonialism - also a multicultural Hong Kong family. Each separate house has its own atmosphere representing a different kind of culture. Tellingly, the new generation is gradually abandoning traditional Chinese values and culture. Both the two daughters have ceased to show respect for their ancestors, and enjoy fewer connections to members of their immediate family through living in a foreign country. As a result of such displaced and different personal backgrounds, cultural conflicts emerge. When the oldest daughter uses Feng-Hsui to decorate her new house, neither her German husband nor daughter can understand her behavior. Similarly, because of their lack of a common identity, the Hong Kong family fight often even though they love each other very much. This can be seen most clearly in the scene where the parents decide to move out of Bing's house and buy a new one. That the parents choose to live in a traditional way is obvious the moment the father tells his three sons what he is going to do with his back yard; he intends to build a green house to plant tea trees, and a pond full with lotuses, and to build one more house for Ka Ming when he gets married. Conversely, Bing chooses to live in the western style - she would do everything to be a part of Australian society. In order to attain the high social position which will help her fulfill her dream, Bing becomes dominant, bossy, and unable to get along with her other family members. Finally, the oldest daughter needs to live in the German lifestyle, because she has married a German husband: she is not able to run the risk of insisting on living the life of the traditional Chinese because the resulting conflicts may tear her family apart.

Despite all this, *Floating Life* does end on a positive note. (Compare this with the end of *Farewell China*, wherein Maggie Cheung's character suffers serious mental problems and eventually kills her husband, thus viciously satirizing the myth of the American Dream.) Presenting an ultimately optimistic outlook, Law uses Mui-Mui's (the oldest daughter's child) perspective to suggest that all the difficulties can be overcome, and that one day the whole family can indeed unify again and live together.

For Hong Kong people, the questions of identity and identification are crucial. Such issues form the basis of this film. By the end of the narrative, even if there is no getting around the

burden of identity, the suggestion presented is that fears can be erased. *Floating Life* presents a situation whereby immigrants want to be able to settle down without facing an unknown future. Even if they do not always carry their own roots, it cannot be denied that they are keen to find new roots for themselves. Once we can understand this predicament and the emotional lives of those who are faced with it, we are able to comprehend the immigrant experience. Such comprehension may lead to greater tolerance. This is the message that *Floating Life* delivers.

Green Fish

Dir: Lee Chang-Dong, 1997

A review by Jeeyoung Shin, Indiana University, USA

Green Fish (*Chorok Mulkogi*) is the first feature film by Korean novelist-turned-director Lee Chang-Dong, who had earlier written the screenplays for two internationally acclaimed films by Park Kwang-Su, *To the Starry Island* (1993) and *A Single Spark* (1996). The movie originated as a result of the experimental gathering together of four talented individuals. Both impressed by Lee's new script and also believing in Lee's potential as a filmmaker, well-known director and actor Yeo Kyun-Dong, theater and film actor and producer Myung Kye-Nam, and well-known actor Moon Sung-Keun co-founded East Film Company, together with Lee, to support Lee's debut as a director; Yeo and Moon themselves play major characters in the film. On its subsequent release in South Korea, *Green Fish* enjoyed critical acclaim and a favorable popular reception, and it was also well received at many international film festivals. Indeed, the achievement of *Green Fish*, together with the recent success of his second feature film, *Peppermint Candy* (2000), has made Lee Chang-Dong one of the most important new Korean directors.

The basic storyline of *Green Fish* does not strike one as particularly original. However, Lee's sensitive handling of his subject matter renders the otherwise clichéd characters and story highly distinctive. Having finished his military service, twenty six year-old Makdong (Han Suk-Kyu) returns home to find his family broken up and his old hometown a victim of economic progress. Unable to secure employment, he falls in with a group of Seoul gangsters through Miae (Shim Hye-Jin), a nightclub singer whom he had previously saved from harassment by a group of strangers on a train while on his journey home. Makdong is soon caught up in the web of relationships between the gang boss, Bae Tae-Gon (Moon Sung-Keun), who treats him like a younger brother, and Miae, his unhappy mistress. In the meantime, Bae's former boss, Kim Yang-Kil (Myung Kye-Nam, comes back and threatens to take over Bae's running of the mob business. Torn between his loyalty to Bae and his infatuation with Miae, Makdong kills Kim for Bae but is himself cruelly exterminated by Bae.

While keeping its own cinematic artistry, *Green Fish* presents a critical picture of fast changing contemporary Korean society. This is effectively depicted through the use of the film's two settings: the newly developing suburban city of Ilsan and the Youngdeungpo area of Seoul. Ilsan, originally a rural community, has recently become a satellite city of Seoul, spouting high-rise apartment complexes and modern subway stations that connect it to the Seoul Metropolis. The transformation of Ilsan coincides with the disintegration of Makdong's family. All Makdong's siblings, except for his mentally handicapped brother, have left home in a frantic struggle for survival. A symbol of the "Korean dream" that has driven people to the blind pursuit of material success, Ilsan therefore reflects the rapid changes that Korean society has undergone during the past three decades.

Youngdeungpo, on the other hand, is the stage for Makdong's own personal search for the "Korean dream." Representing the dark, seedy side of Seoul, Youngdeungpo is a place famous for factories, nightlife, crime and violence, as well as for drawing migrants from outside the city in search of luck and fortune. As Makdong indicates, Ilsan and Youngdeungpo are inevitably linked to each other. Those original inhabitants of Ilsan who remain such as Makdong's mother, who works as a housemaid, and his brother, who sells eggs in the newly developed residential area - often become day-workers and make their living serving the new residents who have taken over the land. By contrast, the many young people who leave their home and turn to Metropolitan Seoul often end up on the dark streets of Youngdeungpo.

In its concern with the consequences of such transformations in Korean society, *Green Fish* invokes the familiar theme that good old values have been destroyed and replaced by a new materialistic lifestyle and obsession with modernization. "Green fish," like Makdong himself, provide a symbol of lost innocence. Certainly, Makdong harbors the unrealistic dream that he can rebuild the past, that he can hold his family together. In his last telephone call to his family after the murder of Bae's former boss, Makdong tearfully recalls an innocent moment from his childhood when he, together with his siblings, played in a stream looking for green fish. But the film makes clear that it is now too late to go back to such an innocent past. Ironically, when Makdong eventually brings the family together in the running of a homely family restaurant, it is at his own expense. This last scene is one of the most memorable in the film. Bae and the now pregnant Miae, who have moved to Ilsan, happen to visit the family restaurant. While Makdong's family and the couple go about their business as if nothing has happened, we are encouraged to remember what has been lost and what has happened to the innocent youngster.

However, although the film mourns lost innocence, or the loss of old values such as the idea of family, its attitude is neither regressive nor didactic. For example, the ending mentioned above is highly ambiguous, as it simultaneously represents Makdong's loss and the gain that comes out of his lossnamely, family reunion. Thus, if the film, in reminding us of losses suffered, does not celebrate progress, it does not urge a simple return to the past either. Indeed, part of the film's strength lies in the use of precisely such ambiguity, proving Lee's sophistication as both writer and director.

In fact, the film often reveals strong anti-conservative attitudes. These are best evidenced by the representation of such traditional authority figures as policeman, husband and church deacon. Such figures are often humiliated or mocked for being disrespectful. In an early scene, for example, a team of greedy policemen take bribe money from Makdong's third brother and then run away without leaving him his share. The film also shows Bae's thugs threatening a church deacon who has had an affair with the wife of a cop (one of Bae's connections in the police.) Both the cop who cries over his unsatisfied wife's affair and the deacon who indulges in an illicit affair with her, contradict the traditional images of their respective occupations. Similarly, Makdong's second brother, an alcoholic policeman, is also shown as a disrespectful husband and father, and thus deprived of authority and standing.

Furthermore, as all these authority figures are male, their critical representation suggests something of the film's potential in terms of a counter-reactionary gender politics. It is also worth noting the film's portrayal of Miae in this regard. Initially, she is reminiscent of a film noir *femme fatale*, but she is later differentiated. Rather than being an exploiter, she is exploited by Bae, as when he prostitutes her in order to make a deal with a prosecutor. Along

with Makdong, then, she is represented as one of the most sympathetic characters in the film. More than that, in the last scene, she is the only one who cries over the truth as she finally recognizes Makdong's old home through the photograph that Makdong had earlier given to her. It is important to note, too, that in its rejection of a strict binary division between good and bad, hero and enemy, the film at times even depicts Bae as a sympathetic figure.

One of *Green Fish*'s other significant innovations is its representation of violence. While it appears to borrow elements from other gangster movies, the film does not aestheticize violence in the way that many contemporary gangster films from Hollywood and Hong Kong do. Taking away the glamour of violence, the film shows the horror of violence through the use of a realist gaze. As Lee explained in an interview, "instead of the glamour of the gangster culture, [I] wanted to show the ordinariness, the banal quality of violence" ("Dirt in the Soul": website).

Despite this, Lee's film style is far from dull or boring. In fact, one of *Green Fish*'s great achievements lies in Lee's ability to overcome the dichotomy between art film and popular commercial film often found in Korean cinema by creating both social meaning and intense pleasure. Claiming that "a film that ignores audience is not a film that can be said to have fulfilled its calling as a film," Lee tries to "consolidate artistic merit and popularity with the masses" ("*Green Fish*": web site). Indeed, by creatively borrowing from various genres such as the gangster film, film noir, comedy and melodrama, Lee's intelligent story, coupled with the stunning visuals of Yoo Young-Kil, the most famous and accomplshished veteran cinematographer in Korea, has created one of the most memorable Korean films for both audiences and critics alike.

References:

"Dirt in the Soul." World Socialist Web Site. http://wsws.org/arts/1998/fish-m19.shtml.

Green Fish Website. http://www.cinescope.com/greenfish.

Home and the World

Dir: Satyajit Ray, 1984

A review by Subrata K. Mitra, The University of Nottingham, UK

Few filmmakers can match the skill and authority with which Satyajit Ray depicts the rootlessness and inner contradictions of Indian modernity. Ray received his first critical acclaim for *Pather Panchali* (1955), a poetic and moving depiction of rural life in Bengal. In a career that began shortly after India's independence from British colonial rule and continued up to the late 1990s, Ray never developed a popular following in India, but his work has been much decorated both at home and abroad. Among his many awards are the Best Human Document Award in Cannes, 1956, the Golden Lion at Venice, 1957, the Silver Bear in Berlin (1965), an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement and a posthumous award of Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, in 1998.

Home and the World (*Ghare Baire*) is a later work of this master craftsman. It shares the hallmarks of Ray's genre -- clinical precision and unsentimental lucidity in his depiction of rural and urban scenes, reminiscent of the Italian neo-realists -- with his best work. But it is not in the same league as the better known Apu trilogy (1955-59), or the enchantingly beautiful and haunting depiction of longing and unrequited love in *Charulata* (1964). Unlike these films of universal cinema whose themes of dignified protest and noble fortitude in the face of overwhelming adversity need no interpretation, *Home and the World* is relatively more specific to its historical context and the inner world of the Bengali *bhadralok*, the landed gentry of late nineteenth century Bengal, who saw themselves as the harbingers of modernity and claimed the credit for the Bengal Renaissance. As such, its proper appreciation requires a brief introduction to the context of history and society in which its text is embedded.

The film centres around three principal characters: Nikhil, Bengali aristocrat and quintessential renaissance man, Sandip, leader of the nationalist Swadeshi movement who is both his friend and political adversary, and Bimala, Nikhil's intelligent and highly-born wife who is the foil on which the contest of wills and ways of the two leading men takes place as the narrative develops through its three main crises. The film is set against the backdrop of the division of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905, a move much resented by the Bengali elite as an astute imperial ploy of "divide and rule" that pitted the Muslim majority East Bengal against the dominant Hindu gentry. There are two parallel narratives. The first concentrates on the divergent reactions to British rule, with Sandip as the advocate of forceful resistance through boycott of British goods. Opposed to it is the moderate, liberal muddling-through of Nikhil, who has spent his own money to promote local industry but acknowledges both the superiority of British goods and the economic costs that the policy of *swadeshi* represents for the poorer, Muslim majority of his tenants. The larger currents that are sweeping through the political world have their implications for the events at home. Committed as he is to social uplift and emancipation under the benign leadership of the gentry, Nikhil wants Bimala, a spirited soul who lacks formal western education, to come out of seclusion. To that end, he

has engaged an English governess who gives her lessons in reading, singing English nursery rhymes and the obligatory piano!

The two stories converge and quickly come to the first crisis of the film as Sandip arrives at the palace and is ensconced in the guest quarters. In a beautifully shot sequence in slow motion, Nikhil leads Bimala through the door that remains forever shut for women of the family, to meet his friend Sandip. In crossing over from *home to the world*, Bimala treads a path of no return. Here, the presence of Sandip the nationalist leader, played with great sensitivity by Soumitra Chatterjee, a veteran of many highly acclaimed Ray films, is crucial. Once classmates, the two leading men have followed divergent courses in life. Sandip, the master of rhetoric and deceit, Machiavellian manipulator of the idealist and the gullible, casts a momentary spell on the imagination and affection of Bimala. The good wife turned assertive woman, Bimala takes the side of Sandip as the two stories, the larger one of Indian nationalism against British colonial rule and the personal one of Sandip's instrumental use of the national struggle for his predatory goal of taking possession of his friend's wife, merge into one another. We find Bimala and Sandip in a passionate embrace, as close to a carnal union as Indian censorship and Bengali prudishness would permit on screen, indicating a second critical moment in the narrative.

The story comes full circle in the third part in a manner that shows Ray at his best. The nationalist hero is morally flawed, and deeply tainted with incitement to communal violence against the poor Muslims opposed to a Hindu-led anti-British struggle. The cuckolded husband is riven between supporting his wife's emancipation, to the point of losing her to his powerful and immoral adversary, and defending what is his by right, at the cost of his liberal commitment to her preference for the predatory Sandip who is also his friend. The liberated Bimala is flawed too, marking her rite of passage from *home to the world* with the handing over of her husband's gold coins to her lover, and regretting her mistake as she learns more of his feckless and self-serving character. In a quick denouement, we see a communal riot breaking out between Hindus and Muslims as Bimala comes to her senses and returns home, symbolically by the same door that had released her to the world. The charlatan-patriot returns part of his loot and then decamps. The wronged husband forgives the errant wife and rides away into the thick of the violence and dies. "I needed to be punished," says Bimala, no longer of home nor of the world, as the curtain falls. The moral universe of Bengal and the patriarchal world at the turn of the century reasserts itself, unperturbed by the goings on at the level of mere individuals.

Ray had already tackled the theme of corrupted love and the tragic assertion of feminine sexual autonomy woven together on the backdrop of great, far away, political movements in *Charulata*, also based on a story by the Nobel prize-winning author Tagore. Both films run on parallel lines. The greater movements in the world cause just enough moral uncertainty in the intimate world of the family to permit one solitary transgression of the traditional code of sexual morality, only in the end for the circle to close in, the errant chastised. There are no heroes nor pure villains in these stories of rebellious acts devoid of power and spirit, which are in the end unable to sustain themselves. Even tradition, which appears to win, is tainted as well, because of its failure to offer its own solution to the challenges posed by modernity through indigenous counter-revolution.

As with his other films, Ray maintains control over the text through an authentic and forceful screenplay that retains the flavour of Tagore's novel. The dubbing is competent. Period furniture and costume effectively convey an authentic image of Bengal renaissance and the

tragi-comic efforts of the gentry at imitating the ways of their masters in their attempts become modern.

Viewers unfamiliar with Ray's *oeuvre* might find the film lacking in power and buoyancy and the acting arrested and mechanical. It is bound to disappoint those with prior expectations of a display of the exotic shapes and ways of the East, of mysticism, and of reckless and uncontrolled passion. It is important here to remember that the film is in the end a powerful and elegant satire on the Bengali *bhadralok* where Ray, who started his career as a cartoonist, comes full circle, albeit surreptitiously. That said, *Home and the World* is still a powerful and disturbing film, with its own moments of great beauty and pathos.

The Indian Tomb

Dir: Joe May, 1921

A review by Richard J. Aldrich, University of Nottingham, UK

Joe May's extraordinary epic *The Indian Tomb* - starring the immortal Conrad Veidt as the central figure, the evil, sadistic and charismatic Maharajah - is thought by many critics to constitute one of the most significant European cinematic achievements of the 1920s, yet it remains little known. This epic was made in Germany and takes the form of a lavish, two-part adventure thriller. The atmospheric Indian setting is a mixture of romantic imagination tinged with German Expressionism. Ayan, the lordly Maharajah of Eschnapur, has lost his wife, the stunning Princess Savitri, to a young British Army subaltern, MacAllan. Ayan retaliates by scheming to destroy MacAllan and decides to build a massive tomb-dungeon to his perished love where the hapless Princess Savitri is to be imprisoned alive for all time. He despatches the holy man, the Yogi of Ramigani, to secure the services of the renowned British architect Herbert Rowland. However, Ramigani then foretells that the act of revenge will trigger a catastrophic and destructive series of events which will destroy the Maharajah's's life and kingdom. This is the opening episode to a dramatic series of climactic scenes and a dense plot which includes exotic dancers, sexual extortion, man-eating tigers, mountain pursuits, exotic temple festivals, underground dungeons and exploits in crocodile-infested waters. In this respect this film represents a superb example of popular representations of the "mysterious East" in Western film and a remarkable subject for students of Orientalism.

The many "Indian" locations were manufactured and filmed in Germany at Joe May's fifty-acre production centre. May's set designers and creative staff of 320 craftsmen set to work to create extraordinary features such as "the temple of the unknown God" and the palace of the Maharajah, with its lush tropical gardens and legendary "hall of 1,000 columns". Extensive research in India carried out expressly for the film ensured that some of these features were accurate, not only in detail, but also in terms of their scale. Curiously, although the images were often stereotypical and exaggerated, this was paralleled by an obsessive anxiety to achieve a close proximation to reality in the film's many physical features. The cost of this film was more than twenty million marks, an unimaginably large sum for that day. The cost was not only reflected in the vast set but also in the use of numerous live exotic animals, including all the tigers from the world-renowned Hagenbeck Circus, and the drafting in of over 3,000 extras.

The well-known Danish matinee idol Olaf Fønss (star of August Bolm's 1913 *Atlantis*) played Rowland the architect of the tomb, while Mia May, Joe May's wife and lead in many of his earlier silent films, appears as the unhappy Irene, Rowland's wife. Paul Richter, who also later appeared in many of Fritz Lang's own films, including *Die Nibelungen* (1922-1924), is the dashing young subaltern, MacAllan. Bernhard Goetzke, who also featured in many of Lang's later films, is especially memorable in the key role of Ramigani the Yogi. Although directed by Joe May, the film also contains many important characteristics of later

Lang films, over and above what one might expect to find in the Lang and Thea von Harbou screenplay.

Certainly, this film is partly of interest because of its importance in the development of the work of Lang, the Austrian-born film director, who would become one of the commanding figures of German and American cinema. Through his career, which spanned over four decades, and in which he pioneered new genres and forms of cinematic expression, Lang remained obsessed with this early Indian subject and returned to it in the late 1950s to remake two further films based on the earlier work, but this time filmed on location in India (*The Tiger of Eschnapur/Der Tiger von Eschnapur*, 1959; *The Indian Tomb/Das indische Grabmal*, 1959). Several themes of lifelong fascination for Lang are dominant in the film including the importance of mystic religions and the occult.

Lang was not without real experience of the "mysterious East". Lang's parents were determined that he should train to be an architect, a profession which he soon learned to hate. Having fled the parental home, he embarked on a wandering tour of North Africa, Turkey, Asia Minor, Bali and the South Pacific that preoccupied most of 1912. He returned to Europe to become interested in theatre and film work. In 1920, the year that Decla-Bio merged with German film giant UFA, Lang began a long partnership with screenwriter Thea von Harbou. Some of their early work, including *The Tired Death* (also known as *Destiny*, 1921) became classics of Expressionism. One of the earliest collaborations was the script of *The Indian Tomb*, produced in 1921.

After fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s and making a successful career as an originator of film noir in the United States, Lang returned to his first love. Irritated by the studios meddling with his original conceptions, he longed to direct films where artistry was not compromised by commercial considerations. He travelled to India in 1956 and did research for an independent project called Taj Mahal. Again this was a subject which focused upon Maharajahs, Indian princesses, memorialisation and tombs. But finance was a problem and not far into the planning stages, he abandoned the project and returned to the United States. In 1957 a German production company offered him a chance to direct a two-part story, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb*. The scripts were closely based on the work written by Lang and Thea von Harbou in 1921, and held great personal significance for the director. Although filmed on location in India, the resulting films were somehow less dramatic and, arguably, less Indian, a pale shadow of the mammoth 1921 epic. The later films did not meet with the acclaim of the earlier work, perhaps because they were forced to become realistic rather than fantastic, and therefore somehow at odds with the genre of the original conception. Ironically, in the real India, the Orientalist drama and theatricality of the "mysterious East" could not be recaptured.

One of the most extraordinary moments in the film is the scene in which Conrad Viedt, the Maharajah, appears with his body covered with gold paint representing Krishna. This alerts us to the value of May's film not only to those with an interest in the forgotten epic, but also those working in the field of cultural studies, for example those with an interest in Edward Said's work on Orientalism. Equally it is of interest to those with interest in postcolonial theory and those with interest in the comparative study of religion. *The Indian Tomb* is a treasure house for those interested in the history of ideas and especially the cultural symbolic of the "mystic East" in modern Western consciousness. The appearance of the Maharajah in this guise and also the important role of the "Ramigani the Yogi" are clear sign that Hinduism is being portrayed as something mystical and used as a vehicle to reinforce the sense of the

"other". All the familiar themes of the Western portrayal of Hinduism are here, including the strong emphasis on mysticism itself, despite the fact that it would be difficult to argue that mysticism is a primary characteristic of that religion. Mysticism is also used to separate out the realms of the political and the real from the spiritual and the transcendental. The contrast between the "mystical", which is supposed to be otherworldly and the political, which is deemed secular, reflect cultural presuppositions of Western society.

But Lang's screenplay is more than his familiar mixture of unconscious desires and a merciless fate set against a background of Western Orientalism with a large budget. The appearance of the Maharajah as Krishna crosses the Western boundary between the secular and the religious and embodies a time-honoured desire on the part of Asian rulers, not only in India, but also in Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia, to employ religious motifs and divine associations to enhance their power. The connection of the political and the real with otherworldly is a game which is played even now in the politics of many Asian countries. In this sense Lang's screenplay is visually Orientalist, but in its political themes it is able to make some acute observations on Asian society. It skilfully reflects Lang's own real experience of the East, not only capturing Western stereotypes of the East, but also in attempting to capture Western stereotypes of the West in the East. These themes include the young subaltern and the Indian Civil Service architect (surely a reference to Lang's abandoned career) and the impact of the Europeans in the Indian Civil Service and the Indian Army in India.

Murmur of Youth

Dir: Lin Cheng-sheng, 1997

A review by Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley and Gary D. Rawnsley, University of Nottingham, UK

It is rare but nice to see a movie with very different Chinese and English titles, yet both are very close to the essence of this story. The original Chinese title for what is known as *Murmur of Youth* in the English speaking world is *Mei-li Zai Chang Ge* (meaning "Mei-li is singing"). The main characters in the movie are two young ladies in their late teens, both of whom are called Mei-li. "Mei-li," meaning "beauty" or "beautiful," is a common Chinese name for females and so obtains a symbolic meaning here representing young Chinese women. While working side by side in the ticket office of a cinema, the two Mei-lis begin to share their secrets and desires, hopes and despairs, loves and pains. On one level the movie represents the repressed voice of youth accompanied by the process of growing up and self-realisation, like an extremely beautiful but sentimental song lingering in the air.

Director Lin Cheng-sheng is one of the fastest rising stars in contemporary Taiwanese cinema. Some critics think that Lin's work is made only for audiences who have grown-up in Taiwan, but *Murmur of Youth* was so well received in the international arena, including Cannes, Paris and Tokyo, that we believe such comments are unfounded. Clearly, the feminine issues touched upon in the movie have transcended geographical, political, cultural and social boundaries, even though there are strong local elements in the film which cannot be denied. In other words, the setting for the movie provides a very local flavour that is immediately identifiable to all who have lived there. However, the characters and the situations they face, as well as the emotions they feel, are universal.

Lin Cheng-sheng began his movie career by shooting documentaries. Unlike many traditional documentary filmmakers in Taiwan, Lin is not "political" or, at least, he does not have a specific agenda. Nevertheless, this does not mean he is not "controversial." The homosexual desires exposed in *Murmur of Youth*, and the issues of incest discussed in his later film, *Sweet Degeneration* (Fang Lang, 1997), have both inspired and repelled. But as Lin has admitted in a journal published by the Movie Foundation of the Republic of China, *Cinema Appreciation* (July-August 1998, No. 94), he focuses on these issues simply because they fascinate him. Such motivations mark the key difference between the directors of the mid-1990s and those of the mid-1980s. When martial law was lifted in 1987 and Taiwan began to liberalise, filmmakers mainly focused on contentious social issues to express their anger and desire to rebel. But now the younger generation of filmmakers have begun to deal with these problems from a more intimate perspective and have resisted rooting their films in any social or political agenda.

Before he turned *Mai-li Zai Chang Ge* into a feature film, Lin made a documentary under the same title in which he recorded the daily lives of one of his girlfriends, Mei-li. As he revealed in the *Cinema Appreciation* interview, Mei-li told him many inner sexual secrets that deeply fascinated him during the making of the documentary. As a filmmaker, he was interested in

exploring these issues further. However as a friend, he felt that he must edit this material out in order to protect Mei-li and himself. He said, "Mei-li will have boy-friends and get married in the future. I will never know how her future partner will react to the documentary. Since his chance of seeing the film and his attitude towards the film are both out of my control, the only thing that I can do now is to cut out anything that I consider may be harmful."

Such experiences made Lin realise the limitations of his work. He would never be able to portray and discuss the ultimate human intimacy that fascinates him the most through the format of documentary. Hence he turned to feature films as a way of exploring freely sensitive and controversial themes. Perhaps this process of transformation explains why the feature film *Murmur of Youth* resonates with the strong style of documentary. The open ending, the frequent use of silent long shots in many scenes, and the way both Mei-lies are introduced through their daily lives at the beginning of the film all lend the movie a distinctive edge.

One interesting point is that the movie shown in the cinema that both Mei-lis work at is *Tropical Fish*, directed by Chen Yu-shun. According to the scenes depicted in *Murmur of Youth*, one senses that *Tropical Fish* has received a satisfactory degree of popularity. This may be true in reality where *Tropical Fish* is concerned, but the situation of the domestic market for the majority of Taiwanese movies is in fact far from ideal. Between the end of May to the end of September 2000 when both reviewers stayed in Taiwan, not one single locally produced movie had been released on the island. This year the programme of the annual Golden Horse Film Festival, traditionally hosted by the Government of Information Office in order to encourage and promote the domestic movie market, has been flooded with movies from all over the world with only a couple of movies produced on the island. Taiwanese cinema is currently at an all-time commercial low. This is a pity as there is so much talent making high quality movies that win numerous prizes on international platforms. Unfortunately many of these movies do not even have the chance to be shown in Taiwan. Some may argue that this is a familiar problem associated with art-house cinema. But curiously there is a healthy market on the island which supports mainly foreign art-house movies, especially those made in Europe. Why don't audiences in Taiwan support art-house movies made in Taiwan? Do movie distributors give them enough opportunities to demonstrate their support? More importantly, why are modern Taiwanese directors fascinated with making art-house movies rather than films that may have mass appeal? This brief review is unable to address the big and complex issues of systems of moviemaking, markets and the arrangements for releasing movies in Taiwan. But we hope that filmmakers, audiences and the government will soon face up to the challenge and stimulate a renaissance in Taiwan's movie industry.

My Village at Sunset

Dir: H.M. Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia, 1992
The Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist

The Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist

(dir. H.M. Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia, 1996)

A review by Caroline Hughes, University of Nottingham, UK

"The star of my films is never an actor: it is (always) CAMBODIA." HM Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia, Brussels, 1995. ("Message": website)

A cartoon in the online opposition journal, *Light of Khmer Nation Bulletin*, depicts 1990s Cambodia as a scene of destruction and chaos, over which a venal politician gloats, one foot on the chest of a Cambodian corpse. At center stage, amid felled trees, lethargic beggars and destroyed temples, appears the King of Cambodia, His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, bent double, holding a camcorder between his legs, shouting "Action!" and filming a shot of his own bare bottom. In the background, a chorus of farmers stand cheering and holding a banner which reads "Long live the King of Cambodia." To stage right, a statue of King Jayavarman VII -- whom Cambodian myth portrays as the ideal of the righteous monarch -- covers its eyes in despair (*Light of Khmer Nation*: website).

Since the 1960s King Sihanouk's filmmaking has been much derided by his critics as the western pastime of a "playboy prince" and a distraction from affairs of state. But to view Sihanouk's films as inept or frivolous mistakes the political nature of these productions. Sihanouk's films are less a distraction from his position as monarch than an expression of it, as indicated by the absorption of the cartoon Sihanouk with his own anatomy. As such, the films are interesting documents of Sihanouk's own understanding of his role in Cambodian politics and history.

The tendency to self-document their own importance through an artistic medium is not a new phenomenon among Cambodian Kings. The committing of post-colonial Khmer kingship to celluloid reflects the Angkorean tradition of reifying in stone the Brahminist cosmologies that underwrote the position of the monarch in the Khmer Empire based at Angkor from the tenth to fifteenth centuries. The great stone temple mountains of Angkor Wat and the Bayon reproduce the hierarchy of relations between commoner, court, monarch and angel, while portraying, in intricate bas-relief, stories of life in the village, at court, and among the gods. In terms of artistry, western eyes view the rather creaking naivete of Sihanouk's work as a poor substitute for the vibrant and sophisticated carvings at Angkor. But it is important to note that these films are not intended to be viewed by modernists seeking the shock of the

avant-garde. Like the temples of Angkor Wat, they are not designed to convey new or disturbing sensations, but to encapsulate in visual form, for the edification of ordinary (often illiterate) Cambodians, what is already known -- namely, the essential and sustaining position of the King as father and guardian of the Khmer nation.

In the 1990s, this view was not uncontested. Cambodia's history, since independence from France in 1953, is a bloody and frightening tale. Ideological crossfire from the Cold War and the struggle in Vietnam caused millions of casualties. King Sihanouk was rarely out of shot in this unfolding drama, maneuvering consistently so as to upstage other actors, and often writing himself in afterwards as the star of scenes already played. However, other characters have repeatedly attempted to expel the King from the script, from the republicans who staged a *coup d'etat* against Sihanouk in 1970, to the Pol Pot regime who kept him under house arrest as an ideological embarrassment, to the Vietnamese-backed regime of the 1980s that fought a scorched earth war against royalist insurgents.

Yet the King's presences and absences have continued to be widely viewed by the ordinary citizen as of deep significance, symbolizing the well-being of the state. Since launching his campaign for independence in 1953, the King himself has used departure as a sign of displeasure, and as a withdrawal of his legitimation of the regime in power. Thus his Royal Crusade for Independence of 1953 saw Sihanouk withdrawing to the north of the country, and refusing to return to Phnom Penh until France ceded independence, while similar tactics were deployed in 1997, following a military confrontation that ousted his son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, from the position of First Prime Minister. In the early 1970s, Sihanouk's own ousting from Prime Ministership, exile in Beijing and subsequent radio broadcasts in support of the communist party, or "*Khmers Rouges*," was a significant factor in the eventual advent of that movement to power. Throughout the 1980s, Sihanouk patronized a border resistance movement that prevented the Vietnamese-backed regime that ousted Pol Pot from legitimizing itself as the rightful government of Cambodia.

The impact of Sihanouk's absences on the legitimacy of the regime has supported a view of Kingship as sustaining and protective of a Khmer land and culture that is habitually portrayed in post-colonial Cambodian political discourse as under imminent threat of "melting away." In the 1990s, the withdrawal of the protective shadow of the King causes immediate consternation and feelings of insecurity among Cambodian citizens. The threat perceived is conceptualized as an alleged influx of Vietnamese settlers and Thai soaps, viewed as corrupting to Khmer culture and blood. This influx is portrayed as the latest chapter in a story of Khmer decline that began with the fall of Angkor to a marauding Thai army in the fifteenth century. In this context, *Samdech Euv*'s (the Lord Father's) presence and guardianship, during the UN-sponsored peace process that ended Cambodia's decade of international isolation and succeeded in limiting the war, was frequently acknowledged by UN personnel as vital to their attempts to organise a ceasefire and elections as a precursor to Cambodia's re-emergence as a reconstructed state.

It is against this backdrop that Sihanouk's recent films must be viewed. *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist* and *My Village at Sunset* were both made during the period of Cambodia's UN-sponsored transition, and represented a return to a directorial career that had been suspended since Sihanouk's ousting from power in 1970. The temporal connection between political power and artistic output may well reflect the function of Sihanouk's films as a vehicle for constructing and celebrating his own (renewed) Kingship.

Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist is a short film which enacts a vignette from history -- the main event is an episode of hand-to-hand combat between a Khmer King and a would-be secessionist. The film was made in 1993, in response to a crisis that occurred following the UN-organised national elections held in that year. Elements of the party that lost those elections, the Cambodian People's Party, threatened to set up a secessionist government in the party's eastern electoral and military strongholds. In making *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist*, Sihanouk enacts and idealizes his intervention in this crisis.

This point is made openly, as Sihanouk himself describes the 1993 secession movement as the inspiration for his film:

> In 1993, a tiny group of Cambodian figures attempted to achieve the secession of a handful of provinces from Cambodia. I succeeded in putting a halt to their action by promising amnesty to the guilty parties if they accepted to immediately rally to the central government. These amateur secessionists did so and everything fell back into place without any bloodshed. ("Message to Man": website)

The choice of words here is significant. The depiction of the emergence of order from chaos, following the King's intervention, in the phrase, "everything fell back into place without any bloodshed," stands in sharp contrast to the perpetual turmoil and suffering -- the vivid experience of life in which things are out of place, and accompanied by much bloodshed -- in Cambodia from 1970 to 1991. Foremost among elements that were out of place during this period was Sihanouk himself, who spent most of the two decades in exile.

Sihanouk makes explicit the seriousness of the threat of secession by linking this crisis to the longstanding and deeply embedded Khmer fear of the loss of the Khmer land to powerful neighbours: "it was (and is) not possible to accept the dislocation of one's homeland (ibid)."

Sihanouk's portrayal of the struggle between King and secessionist posits the King as an essential ingredient in Khmer nationalism. He portrays the King as the sustainer of the homeland, the guardian against the feared dismemberment of Cambodia. The historical episode, like, Sihanouk hopes, the contemporary one, shows the power and wisdom of the King, a wisdom that is portrayed, through comparison of the two events, as the wisdom of ages. The location of the film among the ruined temples of Angkor -- the fount of Khmer nationhood and culture -- explicitly connects kingship in Cambodia today with the glories of kingship in the Angkorean past.

The same location is used for *My Village at Sunset*, and it is significant that themes of Kingship and Kingly duty are also found here, in slightly more covert fashion. *My Village at Sunset* offers a contemporary story. A young doctor returns from abroad to work in a provincial hospital treating the victims of landmines. He falls in love with a local nurse, marries her, and is later killed, a victim himself of a landmine explosion.

The setting is UN-era Cambodia. The doctor has been brought to the hospital by the Supreme National Council, or SNC, a council chaired by Sihanouk during the period of UN administration. Cambodian audiences would immediately identify in the character of the doctor the King himself -- not only because the doctor, like the King, returns from exile with restorative powers to be used to heal his nation, but also because the actor playing the doctor is instantly recognisable as HRH Prince Norodom Sihamoni, one of Sihanouk's sons.

The casting of Sihamoni in this role is not merely contingent. A member of the Cambodian royal family retains his royalty in whatever role he chooses to play. In casting his son in such roles, Sihanouk reprises his own performances of the 1950s and 1960s, as a variety of screen characters, and in the real life artifice of his career as "Prime Minister." Sihanouk abdicated the throne in 1955, in favour of his father, in order to contest parliamentary elections as a civilian politician. However, just as Sihamoni remains self-evidently royal in the film, so Sihanouk remained self-evidently King of Cambodia throughout his career, and won repeated landslide electoral victories thanks to rural reverence and support for royalty.

Dismemberment is an important theme in the film, used to reflect the tortured experience of the Khmer nation and people over the previous twenty five years. The maimed and limbless torsos on display in *My Village at Sunset* bear the inscriptions of the spiritual torment of the Khmer nation. The cinematography of *My Village at Sunset* juxtaposes serene rice fields flanked by sugar palms -- the central motif of Khmer territory, subsistence, and ritual -- with sudden violent explosions, and images of bleeding bodies. These sequences are used to depict the brutalization of the Khmer land and the Khmer body, and hence the Khmer nation.

The response of the King to national dismemberment is the central theme of both films. In *The Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist*, the King ignores the advice of his counsellors to risk his own life in mortal hand-to-hand combat with the man who threatens the integrity of his nation. In *My Village at Sunset*, the doctor's despair when he views the patients in the hospital is the appropriate response of a righteous King. King Jayavarman VII -- an Angkorean king remembered as the ideal of righteous Kingship -- is alleged to have built hospitals throughout the Khmer empire, inscribing above each entrance the legend, "the suffering of the people is more painful to the King than his own suffering." Sihamoni, as the doctor, endures the pain of the victim by becoming a casualty of landmines himself; the enactment of this on film reminds the audience that their King, Sihanouk, is prepared -- metaphorically -- to take on their suffering as his own.

Both central characters thus offer themselves as a sacrifice to the wholeness of the country. In *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist*, the dismemberment of territory (like the sacrifice of the King's life) is threatened but averted; in *My Village at Sunset*, the dismemberment of the body (like the eventual sacrifice) is actual. The difference may reflect the relative uncertainty of 1992, when *My Village at Sunset* was made, and 1993, when crisis had been averted and transition successfully negotiated (for the time being).

In *My Village at Sunset*, the union between the King and his people is also, more happily, symbolized by a marriage ceremony. The vision of the Khmer nation propagated by Sihanouk since independence posits a vision of hierarchical unity between the peasant, or the "little people," and the King (see Girling, 1971). This unity is envisaged as primarily spiritual, and is threatened by the worldliness of the intellectual class and the city never a stronghold of Sihanoukist support and by the machinations of outside powers.

The relationship between King and peasant, which sustained Sihanouk's power from independence until his overthrow by pro-American urban intellectuals in 1970, is depicted in *My Village at Sunset* via the romance between doctor and nurse at the heart of the story. The nurse is a model of Khmer womanhood; she is poor, modest, and respectful to her father, himself a son of the soil shown ploughing his fields. The relationship is threatened by the intervention of a teacher, whose middle class status is clearly signaled by her dress, hairstyle, and the fact that she eats sitting at a table rather than on the floor.

The tender relationship between the doctor and nurse stands in sharp contrast to the lack of care shown by the teacher to her own husband, the wounded soldier Captain Sok. Although Captain Sok is a war hero and an amputee, his wife neglects him, and attempts to seduce the doctor who rejects her. In shame, she flees to Phnom Penh, but fails to find love because of her own lack of virtue; Captain Sok commits suicide. The flightiness of the urban intellectual, and the consequent (unvirtuous) death of her husband, are contrasted to the self-sacrifice of the doctor and the nobility of his wife in her sorrow, displayed at the end of the film. The reference to the suffering brought about by faithless and money-loving urban politicians, as opposed to the mutual commitment of the timeless compact between the King and his poor rural subjects, is only thinly veiled.

The scheming wife who brings destruction is a motif common to both *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist* and *My Village at Sunset*. Once again, this motif can be tied to conceptions of dismemberment -- not only of the injured, cuckolded and, consequently, emasculated Captain Sok, but also of the nation itself. The scheming wife is a character who appears often in Khmer stories and proverbs, and reference is frequently made in Cambodian nationalist discourse to the story of a Khmer King of the 1630s who married a Vietnamese princess, and at her urging, allowed Vietnam to set up customs posts in the Mekong Delta, then inhabited mostly by ethnic Khmers. As a result of the extension of Vietnamese power into this area, Vietnamese immigrants poured into the region, resulting in the claiming of the area by Vietnam (Chandler, 1993: 82). In view of current Cambodian concerns about the decline of Khmer territory since the fifteenth century, this historical fable is retold as a cautionary tale warning of the serious trouble that can be caused by an inappropriate marriage or an overbearing wife.

The wives of the secessionist in *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist*, and Captain Sok in *My Village at Sunset*, thus represent a threat to the fabric, not only of the family and society, but the nation itself, and must be resisted by the King, as guardian of national well-being. The firmness with which the doctor/King rejects the teacher's/urban politician's/ Vietnamese princess's (rather clumsy) attempts at seduction in *My Village at Sunset* accords with a similar restraint shown by the King in *Heir of a Vanquished Secessionist*, and with the lack of mercy shown by the King's trusted advisor in the latter film when the wife is caught fleeing. The King cannot afford to falter when the unity of the nation is at stake.

To a great extent, then, just as the ruins among which his films are set were built to the glory of almost-forgotten Angkorean Kings, Sihanouk's oeuvre is a monument to himself, his post-colonial (re-)construction of Khmer kingship, and his own view of his importance to the continued existence of the Cambodian nation. This would be clear to Cambodian audiences, who would see in his films a mosaic of images that resonate in Khmer myth and memory and reaffirm postcolonial discourses of status and power. Sihanouk claims that the star of his films is Cambodia, but the construction of Cambodia that is offered in these works is, like the temple-mountains of Angkor, a construction that reaches its apotheosis in the person of the monarch himself.

References:

Chandler, David (1993) *A History of Cambodia*. 2nd edition. Bangkok: Silkworm.

Girling, John (1971) *The Sihanouk Myths*. Occasional paper no. 7. Singapore: ISEAS.

Light of Khmer Nation, 21 August, 1999: 1. Available online at http://www.samrainsyparty.org/latest_news/light_of_the_khmer_nation/pdf/document.htm..

"Message from His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia to the 5th Festival de la Video," Brussels, 1995. Online. http:/www.norodomsihanouk.org.message.

"Message to Man," by King Norodom Sihanouk. Available online at www.norodomsihanouk.org/heir.

A Page of Madness

Dir: Kinugasa Teinosuke, 1926

A review by Rayna Denison, University of Nottingham, UK

Kinugasa's silent classic *A Page of Madness* (*Kurutta Ippeiji*) is a product of its rich multicultural origins. It is informed both by Japanese aesthetic traditions and by Kinugasa's involvement with the avant-garde *Shinkankaku* movement of Japan in the 1920s (Peterson, 1989: 36-53). The *Shinkankaku* were a group of artists - including the famous Japanese author, Kawabata Yasunari, who wrote the scenario for *A Page of Madness* - interested in the avant-garde movements present in Europe at that time. It was through his involvement with the *Shinkankaku* that Kinugasa became aware of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*), a film that was to strongly influence *A Page of Madness*.

In *A Page of Madness*, Kinugasa intricately weaves the tale of a janitor working in the asylum where his wife is being treated. Narrative rupture occurs when his daughter arrives and announces her engagement. *A Page of Madness* is thus the story of an estranged family whose patriarch is thrown into chaos when its members are reunited albeit briefly. His subsequent attempts to heal his family's rifts and his inability to do so are reflected by his own descent into a world of fantasy and madness.

Kinugasa displays various motifs that fall in line with the literary work of the *Shinkankaku*, and their influence is also evident in his preferred choice for how the film was to be exhibit. The strongest links with the literature produced by members of the *Shinkankaku* are those of abrupt narrative transition and startling imagery. For example, the motif of the dancing girl, which Kinugasa employs as a signifier for madness and a mirror for the madness of others, is recurrent in the literary works of other *Shinkankaku* members. Kinugasa also uses the narrative flashback technique to provide the sum of the information he gives concerning his main characters' histories. Further to the elements that appear in the film itself, Kinugasa's decision to utilise the alternative distribution circuit (usually reserved for American and other foreign films in Japan) is significant because it physically divorced *A Page of Madness* from more mainstream Japanese films. The fact that the film contains no intertitles and that it was intended to be viewed without the aid of a benshi (narrator-translators who were immensely popular in Japanese cinemas well beyond the silent era) functioned to prescribe an avant-garde reading of the film (Peterson, 1989: 39, 48).

The direct influence of European avant-garde forms on *A Page of Madness* is best illustrated by its textual similarities to *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, the highly influential German expressionist film made in 1919 by Robert Wiener. *Caligari*'s use of a framing story is seen as transgressing classic Hollywood narrative style and its expressionist sets were the antithesis of the realist style (Robinson, 1997). Similarly, Kinugasa extends the use of the framing story by inserting flashbacks and fantasies into the narrative. The first example of this occurs directly after the janitor is introduced. Kinugasa uses a montage to show the death by drowning of the janitor's young child. Water is a frequently used motif in the narrative,

juxtaposed with many of the important plot points. In other examples we see the janitor's fantasies acted out, but unlike Wiener's use of the framing story to create a kind of dream sequence, Kinugasa creates ambiguity with his fantasy scenes. When the bearded madman bows to the janitor at the end of the film, for example, the viewer is left to question the nature of narrative "reality."

Whilst Kinugasa does not use expressionist sets in *A Page of Madness*, he does use elements suggestive of expressionism. In the janitor's final fantasy, the inmates wear traditional Japanese theatrical masks. Theatrical masks have many connotations, but in Japanese culture they strongly invoke images of the highly stylised theatre forms *Noh* and *Kabuki*. This falls under one of the definitions of expressionism given by Robinson, namely "a quality of expressive emphasis or distortion" (Robinson, 1997: 35). Moreover, the superimposition of images like revolving wheels and abstract symbols adds to the sense of distortion that surrounds Kinugasa's portrayal of the inmates of the asylum, and the doctor's portrayal of madness links the two films together very clearly.

James Peterson claims that *A Page of Madness* is an experimental film (Peterson, 1989: 51). He does this in order to explicate its disjunctive narrative style and loose sense of subjectivity, and to suggest reasons for the cornucopia of shots and aesthetic techniques used throughout, including whip pans, superimposition, montage and spotlighting. However, since the narrative centres on a man's descent into madness, it might be more fruitful to discuss these stylistic techniques in terms of these events. The shifting of subjectivity from one character to another suggests a fracturing in the janitor's psyche and emphasises that he is surrounded by madness. The use of whip pans is a signifier of the janitor's paranoia whilst montage and superimposition in the fantasy portions of the film add to the sense of a fracturing in his mind. The use of spotlighting in the later portion of *A Page of Madness* helps to illustrate which are the fantasy portions of the film and also echo the wife's fear of the baying dog outside the asylum. While all of these techniques were used in previous European avant-garde films and may be indicative of Kinugasa's adherence to European avant-garde styles, and while Kinugasa's use of them is undoubtedly experimental, he employs them purposefully in the film to signify the protagonist's descent into madness.

A Page of Madness is representative of an important movement within the history of Japanese filmmaking. The *Shinkankaku* was a movement noted for using European models but for situating them within a long tradition of Japanese aesthetic arts. Kinugasa does this in *A Page of Madness* by incorporating sophisticated European avant-garde stylistic techniques into a film that challenges the highly patriarchal notions of early twentieth century Japanese film. Kinugasa's uncompromising experimentation with different types of shots and his use of a wide range of motifs equates to an increasing sense of narrative dislocation and fracturing within the psyche of the protagonist. For all these reasons and more, *A Page of Madness* is one of the most daring films in the history of Japanese avant-garde cinema.

References:

Peterson, James (1989) A War of Utter Rebellion: Kinugasa's *A Page of Madness* and the Japanese Avant-Garde of the 1920's, *Cinema Journal* 29 (1), (Fall), pp. 36-53.

Robinson, David (1997) *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. London: British Film Institute.

Princess Mononoke

Dir: Hayao Miyazaki, 1997

A review by Sachiko Shikoda, University of Nottingham, UK

Japan, the fifteenth century. A small village in the far northeast is attacked suddenly by a giant possessed warthog, Tatari-gami, or a Cursing God. Ashitaka, one of the few remaining members of a noble clan, shoots the monster but is left with a fatal curse in return. The community's wise woman tells Ashitaka that as the creature had been wounded in the west a cure might be found there. Making his way west, Ashitaka meets a mysterious monk who tells him about a deep forest where no human can approach and its spirit.

Continuing his journey, Ashitaka comes across an isolated iron-mining community where he meets an aristocratic industrialist named Eboshi. He learns that Eboshi invented the fatal bullet that turned the warthog into a Cursing God. He also meets San, or Princess Mononoke, who has been brought up in the forest by wolves and who is feared by the community because of her intense hatred towards Eboshi and the rest of the human race. The ruthless battles between Eboshi's people, local samurai, and the creatures of the forest (including warthogs, wolves, and nocturnal gorillas led by San) are entangled with the worldly monk Jigo's rapacious attempts to obtain the head of the forest spirit, which is believed to hold the secret of immortality. The narrative culminates in a miraculous explosion followed by the forest's rebirth.

Hayao Miyazaki, Japan's most celebrated animation master, has created a series of compelling feature films, including *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Laputa: The Castle in the Sky* (1986), *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988), and *Porco Rosso* (1992), as well as such popular television series as *Lupin III* (1971 and 1980) and *Conan: The Boy of the Future* (1978). *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononokehime*), his latest feature film, was highly acclaimed in Japan and established a new box-office record for a Japanese film after just six weeks on release ($52.6 m). It is fair to say that this is more than just an animated historical adventure tale. While the dramatic adult-oriented action certainly provides an exhilarating experience, the film also reflects Miyazaki's perennial interest in the topical issue of ecology. Indeed, this theme has been present in his work ever since 1984's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (based on his futuristic manga.) This story concerns a princess living in the world a thousand years after the apocalyptic war that devastated human civilisation. Amid encroaching forest fungi that give off poisonous gas and overgrown and ferocious insects, Nausicaa seeks to find a way for humanity and the environment to co-exist peacefully.

Miyazaki's original script for *Princess Mononoke* is spectacularly executed by stunning animation realised through the collaboration of no less than five art directors. The breathtaking realism can be found both in the various characters' movements and in the richly coloured, lush landscape of medieval Japan. The film's publicity proudly claims that 144,000 animated cels were used in production alongside digitally processed computer graphics. Indeed, Miyazaki's depiction of fifteenth century Japan is unquestionably delightful: the clear

blue sky dotted with fleeting clouds as Ashitaka rides his red deer Yaku westward; the enormous fortress-like mining town emerging from the deep mist; the forest spirit's hidden pond quietly filled with transparent water and surrounded by moss-covered ground; the luminous and semi-transparent metamorphosed body of the forest spirit; the burgeoning of thousands of flowers and trees after the massive explosion.

The narrative broadens its scope of action from the poor and isolated village in Japan's pre-feudal northeast to the more industrialised and prosperous southwest. (Ashitaka's clan, Emishi, was forced to remain in hiding for centuries after it lost an ancient battle.) A critique of modern industrial civilisation is alluded to at the very beginning, when Ashitaka is cursed by Tatari-Gami. The wise woman of the village tells the villagers' committee that an iron bullet - a technology they have never encountered before - wounded and then demented the warthog, indicating that something very ominous is afoot in the west. Ashitaka then finds out Eboshi is the person who invented the mortal bullet.

The interaction between Ashitaka and San at first glance seems to represent the conflict between human and nature that provides the film's narrative centre. Yet the film chooses to explore the more ambiguous nature of this relationship. *Princess Mononoke* successfully avoids simplistic dichotomies of good and evil by depicting the world as multifaceted and far more complicated. The rich and layered characterisations contribute significantly to this dimension of the film. Ashitaka and San are far from the fraudulently upbeat characters who usually inhabit child-oriented cartoons, and they evoke delicate and perceptive introspection. In the original Japanese language version, San talks in girlish, tentative tones, yet the U.S. dubbed version, provided by the much more snappy Claire Danes, fully conveys San's stark anger toward the human race. Moreover, while there are various scenes of social conflict, no single group is depicted as completely villainous or heroically good. The film gives everyone their own reasons for behaving the way they do. For example, the indigenous people have to try to live their lives in a harshly wild environment, while the creatures of the wild are being engulfed by civilisation. It is Eboshi who best illustrates this point. She is severely hated by the creatures in the forest because she exploits and therefore kills the forest in the interests of man. At the same time, however, she also provides employment through the running of her iron manufacturing establishment, and even gives work to those most socially marginalised or excluded, such as the lepers and prostitutes she rescues. Also, the widows whose husbands were killed by the wolves admire her courageous enterprise. Despite this, Eboshi's mining town is frequently assaulted by local samurai who try to rob them. In this way, both humans and animals are depicted as simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence.

Although its narrative is set in the Muromachi era (1333-1568), right at the beginning of feudal Japan, *Princess Mononoke* transcends its status as an historical epic. The film's distinctiveness lies in the fact that it manages to incorporate cultural allusions to ancient Japanese tales with a very contemporary theme, namely ecological concerns over possible ways for humans to co-exist in harmony with the natural world. This is exemplified by the ending, wherein San and Ashitaka, although respecting and admiring each other, have to go their separate ways so as to keep their own territory. Yet the implication is that however humbly the humans try to live, they will remain unable to avoid destroying their environment. On these terms, Miyazaki's film is very Japanese in its approach. *Princess Mononoke* does not attempt to claim for itself the status of a moral authority preaching what should be done. Instead, it simply echoes the nature of the relationship between two mutually dependent but at the same time contradictory types of existence.

The Rite of Love and Death

Dir: Yukio Mishima, 1965

A review by Julian Stringer, The University of Nottingham, UK

The primary reason to manufacture a built body is to be able to display it. Bodybuilding, or the engineering of a muscled gendered identity, invests heavily in spectacle, or the public display of that constructed physicality. In this sense the culture of bodybuilding and the culture of cinema have much in common. In each case, spectators pay money to watch a public form of spectacular display unravel in tableau form in front of them. At the same time, both cinema and bodybuilding represent death at work: the actors and the images are only beautiful temporarily -- their memory and power will fade out across time; the muscles will soften and wither away.

To the extent that bodybuilding icons exist in English-language film history, they tend to be thought of as Occidental. Schwarzenegger and Stallone are obviously the most famous examples, but a surprisingly large number of movie performers have displayed their pecs and abs in front of the camera, whether it be for MGM musicals (*Athena*, 1954), Italian peplums (*The Giant of Marathon*, 1959) or the odd charmingly offbeat comedy (*Echo Park*, 1985). For some reason, though, varied images of Asian built bodies have seldom made it to the West, at least outside of martial arts cinema. Indeed, Asia's most notorious bodybuilder fetishist, Japanese author Yukio Mishima, constitutes a rare exception in this regard. His spectacular corporality graces a memorable scene in *Black Lizard* (1968) and was impersonated for Paul Schrader's bio-pic *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985). However, one of his most perversely intriguing exercises in narcissistic public self-display has seldom been seen.

The Rite of Love and Death (aka. *Patriotism*, or *Yukoku*) is an avant-garde short starring, produced, written and directed by the famed novelist in 1965. In his biography *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*, Henry Scott Stokes describes attending an April 1969 screening: "I couldn't watch the screen all the way through this film. It was short, about twenty minutes only. And it included an interminable scene of a hara-kiri, performed by Mishima, who also directed the film. I did not watch him sawing his stomach in half. Shut my eyes tight and waited for the film to finish. Sound track: the dirge from Wagner's *Tristan*. Horrible taste!" (Stokes 1974: 12) In his 1984 *Sight and Sound* report from the set of Paul Schrader's feature, then shooting in Tokyo, critic Tony Rayns reports that *The Rite of Love and Death* "was filmed on a bare set, not unlike a Noh stage, and the only sound was the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan und Isolde*…the film has 'vanished' since Mishima's death; his wife Yoko has destroyed the negative and burned every print she could trace. Apparently she feels that the film was too obviously a rehearsal for Mishima's own actual suicide" (Rayns 1984: 257).

Stokes and Rayns are not wrong. *The Rite of Love and Death* does indeed include an interminable scene of Mishima committing Hara-Kiri in an uncannily gruesome "rehearsal" of his 1970 suicide; it is set on a Noh stage; its sound track is from *Tristan und Isolde*; and

the whole production is in rather horrible taste. What they neglect to mention, however, is that it also provides a fascinatingly hideous answer to the question of whether cinema can be utilised in new ways to preserve the hard body from the ravages of time.

As a way of illustrating this, consider first the fact that *The Rite of Love and Death*'s narrative trajectory charts a clear and obvious movement: from life to death. It is told in five "Chapters." The first, "Reiko," presents images of Reiko (Yoshiko Tsuruoka) making love with her military husband, Lieutenant Takeyama (Mishima). Chapter Two, "The Lieutenant Returns," depicts the latter's return home after the failed coup d'etat of February 1936 in which a group of junior Japanese officers attempted to rid the country of government officials and elder statesmen and so forge a new nation under direct rule. (This incident also forms the basis for Hideo Gosha's 1989 feature *Four Days of Snow and Blood*). Torn between divided loyalties, Takeyama is driven to commit *seppuku*, along with his wife. Prior to their inevitable double-suicide, however, the two of them contemplate the imponderables of love and death. "Their involuntary smiles reflect an unfathomable mutual trust," read the intertitles. "Death is no longer terrifying. Reiko feels as she did on her wedding night." "Final Love" includes more images of the couple's lovemaking, while the final two chapters, "The Lieutenant Commits Hara-Kiri" and "Reiko's Suicide" self-evidently indulge their respective moments of bloody death.

As an example of avant-garde filmmaking, *The Rite of Love and Death* is rather derivative, recalling numerous prior traditions. Aside from the Japanese theatrical influence, for instance -- and perfectly befitting its obsession with *l'amour fou* -- it also resembles an early surrealist short. Fetishistic close ups of body parts and an abundance of superimpositions and associational editing patterns create symbolic links between people and objects. Shock cuts of the kind found in early Bunuel demonstrate a fondness for jarring juxtapositions and the depiction of violent character transformations.

Two themes betray a greater originality, however. Both are linked to Mishima's preoccupation with issues of bodily display and the possibility of preserving the ideal body. First, the almost alchemical progression from Eros to Thanatos in *The Rite of Love and Death* is structured around the gradual and spectacular revelation of Takeyama's built body. This effect works to celebrate the body's stillness and repose, as if in defiance of cinema's essential emphasis on movement and dynamism. Through a startling doubling effect, the theatrical sign of the Noh stage is made to resemble the display stage of the bodybuilding arena. Initially seen in Chapter One in long shot in the full sartorial splendour of the Imperial Palace Guard, Mishima sheds his clothes for Chapter Two, lying naked with his co-star on a highly artificial mounted stage in the house. As they spend their final night together, carefully edited shots fragment aspects of Mishima's body, framing first his darkened eyes, then back and neck muscles, and so on. The foregrounding of the man's muscles are accompanied by a corresponding attention to images of Reiko's growing and obvious pleasure. We see Reiko's mounting excitement but little of the effort that he puts into their lovemaking. In other words, the film suggests that the built male body does not have to strive that hard to sexually please its partner -- even when most physically active it retains its calm beauty. The effort that goes into engineering the constructed physique is thus effaced. Indeed, the only real sign of physical exertion on the part of Takeyama comes in a short montage of him falling back in repose as if to sleep. (Here Mishima's body tumbles down in the frame to land in a pose recalling the image of John Giorno's supine torso in Andy Warhol's *Sleep*, made in the US two years earlier.) Once exposed to the public eye, in other words, the built body must remain perfectly graceful and in its ideal state no matter what it is actually doing.

Second, it is noticeable that there is a similar gradual revelation of Mishima's eyes and face throughout the film. The suggestion here is that the muscle man's motivations remain hidden or obscure. Whereas Reiko's full facial expressions and reactions are clearly presented in close up throughout the movie, Takeyama's are not. As befits the delayed entry of the film's star, Mishima remains offscreen during Chapter One and then appears wearing full military regalia during Chapter Two; even when his face gazes longingly at Reiko at this point, his cap keeps his eyes hidden. This tactic of concealment is present throughout the rest of the episodes, with camera angles habitually obscuring Mishima's face, and dark lighting concealing his eyes even in close ups.

However, the moment when Takeyama plunges the knife into his own stomach constitutes the moment when these patterns begin to change. Now, close shots of Mishima's face under his cap reveal the full extent of the pain in his eyes; the blood is spurting out. The incredible effort demanded of one who disembowels himself brings the twin themes of repose and motivation together. On one hand, the act of Hara-Kiri demands stillness: holding that excruciating position as you are slicing your own abdomen open demands intense concentration and power -- this is the moment when the built body has to be most static and most strong, most graceful and most ideal. (Had Mishima seen Masaki Kobayashi's 1962 international hit *Hara-Kiri*?) On the other hand, it is only now that Takeyama's hidden eyes and face are fully revealed to both Reiko and the viewer. This is the moment of truth, the moment that reveals the (gay?) muscled man's real nature and real emotions. No wonder Mishima's widow wanted this film suppressed -- it suggests a level of interior feeling and motivation existing independent of, and utterly hidden from, the female partner.

This image of Takeyama disembowelling himself with apparent relish, then, constitutes a paradigm shift in the cinematic representation of the built body: astonishingly, the constructed body is being preserved in all of its hardness. Yukio Mishima is a unique figure in international media culture in that after spending a decade building his impressive muscles up, he refused to see them waste away through the process of ageing. He embalmed his hard body through ritual suicide, thus ensuring that it will live on in popular memory in a way that Schwarzenegger and Stallone's may not. *The Rite of Love and Death* is not a particularly good avant-garde short. However, it is a grimly mesmerising testament to one man's desire to retain the body beautiful in the most absolute manner imaginable.

References:

Stokes, Henry Scott (1974) *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Rayns, Tony (1984) Truth with the Power of Fiction, *Sight and Sound*, 53 (4), (Autumn), pp. 256-260.

Tetsuo: The Iron Man

Dir: Shinya Tsukamoto, 1989
Tetsuo II: Body Hammer

Tetsuo II: Body Hammer

(Dir. Shinya Tsukamoto, 1991)

A review by Tsung-yi Michelle Huang, State University of New York at Stony Brook, USA

With their major characters literally becoming cyborgs *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (*Tetsuo*) and its sequel, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer*, narrate how Tokyoites, attracted to the overwhelming power of the urban landscape composed of concrete and iron, themselves mimic the urban landscape of Tokyo. A combination of Japanese *manga* and *Blade Runner*-esque cyberpunk, the *Tetsuo* series tells the horror story of the salaryman's bodily transformation with minimal plot, but provocative visual effects and piercing industrial music. Both films feature a mysterious fusion of metal and flesh which depersonalizes the salaryman, who comes to lose his subjectivity in order to be merged with the space, a city full of steel-and-concrete buildings.

In *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, the unnamed protagonist (identified as "The Salaryman" in the credits) is first represented as just another agreeable salaryman in the city, whose carnal energies, repressed by the "clean and proper" space around him, can hardly be seen except in the wild sex between him and his sexy girlfriend. Yet everything in his life is turned upside down after he runs over a young man on the street while driving to a suburban area with his girlfriend. The salaryman hits a metal fetishist who is inserting iron into his own body. The fetishist runs around in a frenzy at the sight of the rusted metal scraps in his own thigh now infested with maggots, while the couple, not realizing the consequences of this bizarre incident, have wild sex in the bushes, excited at the idea of the victim of the accident lying somewhere down the hill watching them making love. Not until the next day, when the salaryman sees an iron thorn protruding out of his skin, does he start to be aware of what the hit-and-run accident entails.

With his flesh continuously evolving into metal, the horrified protagonist becomes more and more alienated from his salaryman identity (no salary and not a man). Later, when he makes love to his girlfriend, the salaryman witnesses with great trepidation metal bursting out of his body with uncontrollable force. Ashamed of his grotesque body, he hides away from her in a small corner of the house. The girlfriend's first response - "Show it to me. I don't get frightened easily" - leads her to an unthinkable bloodbath. Little does she know that her boyfriend's body has become an unrecognizable mass piled up with metal debris: more than that, his penis suddenly changes into a powerful electric drill. Horror-stricken, the girlfriend

defends herself by stabbing the iron man but fails to save herself from being penetrated and killed by the penis-turned-drill. The salaryman now realizes that he has irreversibly become a metal fetishist.

As the protagonist becomes more and more alienated from his own human flesh, he increasingly becomes part of the urban material and space he occupies. Thus, the story of the iron man demonstrates in a classically expressionistic manner the violence of the global city - the salaryman cannot see what the city truly is until he also becomes the steel-and-concrete space itself. Not only is the protagonist forced to undergo a metamorphosis into a metal body; his environment, the global city of Tokyo, also morphs into an abject space of horror and agony, with city crowds emerging as monsters from unknown lands. For example, on his way to the office the morning after spotting the iron sticking out from his own face while shaving, the salaryman runs into an iron woman where he least expects to find one. This office lady-like woman, a female counterpart of the salaryman, is waiting for the train on a bench with the salaryman. Out of curiosity, she reaches for a deserted lump of metal on the ground of the subway station and soon becomes possessed by the rusted metal. All of a sudden, the transformed woman with metallic tentacles worse than Edward Scissorhands starts to assault the salaryman, chasing after him through the subway tunnels. The simple routine of walking in the city has turned into a dystopian fantasy of daily disasters.

To some extent, the metal that takes over the salaryman's body allegorizes the domination of the industrialized urban space. Instead of seeing a city of high-rises, we see the assorted convulsive images of metal for industrial use or construction. What makes contemporary Tokyo stages its presence in every possible realistic and fantastic form: from the metal and machine in the factory to the metals that invade every imaginable orifice of the human body. Taking on a material form identical to the urban environment, the unnamed protagonist fearfully and reluctantly becomes one with his habitat. Both the unknown woman and the salaryman's experiences of changing progressively into a cyborg resemble a contagious disease, implying the subject's assimilation into urban space as an uncontrollable contamination.

While *Tetsuo: Iron Man* presents mimicry of urban space as a mishap of undesirable but irreversible metamorphosis, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* questions whether Tokyoites can ever escape from such a misfortune. In a sense, the latter film echoes Philip K. Dick's science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, adapted to the screen in 1982 as *Blade Runner*. Like Deckard, the protagonist in *Blade Runner*, the main character in *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer*, Tomoo, is tremendously confused, not knowing if the dehumanized surroundings he sees are part of the ordinary world or post-apocalyptic. Yet what distinguishes the two archetypes is the solution each chooses at the end of the film. While Deckard (in the version of *Blade Runner* released in 1982) decides to abandon the immediate environment to look for an idyllic alternative, his Japanese counterpart opts to mimic the steel-and-concrete environment so as to realize his dream of living in a pastoral space.

While the urban environment is presented through an expressionist lens in *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*, the object of mimicry is much more apparent and concrete in its sequel, which clearly highlights its Tokyo setting. The nightmarish lump of steel and iron rampant in the city in the former film appears as numerous high-rises compacted in the city in *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer*. The dazzling buildings that serve to define the ideal spatial relationship between the body and the city from the very beginning look oppressive and threatening to the protagonist. In other words, the contemporary urban space of Tokyo takes an expressionist form

reminiscent of the dehumanized skyscrapers in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926). Buildings change from "clean and proper" space to sites of imminent danger and devilish violence. Again, reminiscent of the pursuit between Deckard and the android among the roofs of skyscrapers in *Blade Runner*, Tomoo chasing after the cyborg-thugs induces acrophobia in the viewer. The pathological response to the altitude of the high-rise is the flip side of phallic verticality. It provides a contrast to the sense of power and sublimity experienced by those who command the panoptic view from above as well as those who admire the phallic building from below.

Moreover, the sequel reverses the narrative dynamics of *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. To be more precise, the story is not about the transformation of a nice-guy salaryman into a militant iron man, as the first film describes, but the reverse. On one level, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* narrates the same type of story of a salaryman becoming attracted to the violence of urban space. Like the first film, it too starts with the depiction of a typical salaryman, Tomoo, leading a happy family life in Tokyo with his darling wife, Kana, and their young boy. The protagonist soon experiences a series of Kafkaesque events, each centering on a family member being kidnapped - his little boy, twice, then himself, and finally his wife. Similar to its predecessor, the sequel then shows how the salaryman's normal life in the city of Tokyo falls into pieces all of a sudden. However, as the plot thickens, it turns out that the abduction of the family members is an attempt by the cyborg gang to bring Tomoo back to their tribe. Tomoo's long lost brother, the leader of the gang, attempts to awaken the dormant violence in his salaryman body in the knowledge that Tomoo has always been a cyborg but has resisted such an identity through psychological repression.

Such a twist on the original story of a salaryman allows the director to explore the tangled relationships among memory, subjectivity, and space. Tomoo's repressed memory of his cyborg identity allows for an examination of the salaryman's supposedly stable identity from a different, critical perspective. Instilled by their Frankenstein-like scientist-father with the gene of mutation to fight against a decaying world, both Tomoo and his brother can transform their body parts into weapons through sheer will-power. When young Tomoo with his hand-turned-pistol kills his father, who accidentally murdered his wife during an S/M game during intercourse, the father's experiments on his own sons backfire. The primal scene bloodbath - Tomoo's painful rites of passage - implies that the mutation of the human body into a cyborg is self-destructive. From then on, Tomoo suffers amnesia, repressing the traumatic past until he reunites with his brother, Yazu, and his iron-man gang. Seeking shelter in the selective memory of his childhood, Tomoo tries to resist the violence inherent in his body. His amnesia about the loss of his birth parents makes the happy scene of him walking, with his family, in an idyllic open space of Tokyo a comfort in the everyday life surrounded by cold, inhuman high-rises presented through harsh blue-filtered shots. The buildings are seen through his eyes, which become the eyes of the viewer. Tomoo tells Kana about this recurrent dream: "I was in an open space with my family. I was a child again…It was a wonderful dream. Very peaceful." In the self-deluding memory, all traces of violence are erased. Memory convinces Tomoo that he is anything but a metal fetishist like his father or brother. In other words, Tomoo as a salaryman represents the power of normalization to deny his lineage of the iron man tribe. As required by civil society, the boy has to forget the incident of patricide. Later on, he will grow up with his foster parents and become a model salaryman in Tokyo, rather than following, like his brother, the path paved by their father namely, becoming the leader of the underground gang. Through repression and compulsory socialization, Tomoo's real self as a cyborg is tamed and contained temporarily by his docile salaryman identity.

For all his efforts, Tomoo's resistance to the iron man identity fails due to the assaults of the cyborgs. Every time one of his family members is abducted, we see how powerless the salaryman's resistance is vis-à-vis the metal-flesh tribe. For example, during the second abduction of his son, Tomoo runs after the kidnapper as fast as he can up the stairs to the top of the building. The breathless father's hurried footsteps along with his panicked expression are followed by shots of the salaryman driven to the edge of the building and his struggle to climb back inside. Tomoo can hardly protect himself from the strong iron-man thugs, not to mention rescue his family. The shots of the cold steel-and-iron structure of the building in which the fight takes place, as well as the numerous surrounding high-rises, further highlight the vulnerability of the salaryman's human body. Ultimately, the repressed returns in a more powerful way than Tomoo can imagine. Tomoo's extreme rage at the attacker who gestures to drop his son to the ground from the high-rise turns his hand into a pistol, which fires at the kidnapper but kills the son by mistake. Devastated, Tomoo is later kidnapped and forced to undergo an experiment in the underground skinhead faction in which his body is meshed with steel. Mini-cannons exude from his chest and his back whenever the gentle salaryman is overwhelmed by fury. The failure of resistance, so inevitable given the flesh versus steel contrast, seems to imply frailty and even a delusional attribute, both of the utopian memory of an idyllic past that constantly flashes back in Tomoo's dreams, and the happy family life in the present.

Confronted with mounting pressures from the cyborg-gang, Tomoo ultimately makes a drastic decision to stay alive: giving up the resistance to being a cyborg and turning himself again into a weapon-loaded metal lump. That is, Tomoo chooses to be assimilated into the cyborg gang and mimics the violence of his environment. Shooting a cannon from his arm, Tomoo finds the destructive power of his iron man identity fascinating. The salaryman has come to the point where his mutation into a walking arsenal becomes the only way to deal with his repressed past and the imminent danger facing him. No longer resisting the iron man gene in his body, Tomoo accepts his transformed body, which endows him with a power he has never known before. Tomoo furthers his own metamorphosis by stretching out his metal tentacles to the foreheads of all the iron men in the tribe and sucking the whole tribe into his body. Tomoo goes through the ordeal of becoming metal himself so as to avoid the seemingly inevitable fate of being a victim of both the iron man tribe and the similarly hostile buildings of Tokyo. The salaryman's transformation is indeed a result of being seduced by the steel city. At the end of his transformation, Tomoo becomes a grotesque tank loaded with metal mass.

Tetsuo II: Body Hammer thus bespeaks an eerie tale of mimicry. To hold on to the idyllic dream, or to survive at all, Tokyoites have to act as if they were dead so as to be identical with the fleshless ruins around them. With his iron man body, Tomoo destroys the villains, including the underground cyborgs who disrupt his happy family life, and the sinister buildings that shatter his dream of walking in an open space. Yet the shattered dream only resurfaces after his mimicry of the environment. Looking at the shattered skyscrapers at a distance, Tomoo's wife says contentedly: "It's so peaceful." What we see is a happy picture of the salaryman regaining his human body and getting together with his family to enjoy a leisured walk in an idyllic open space like he used to do as a kid. Ironically, it is through mimicking the steel-and-concrete space that Tomoo survives the violence and realizes his idyllic dream.

The Strangers in Beijing

Dir: He Qun, 1995

A review by Hei Ma, Beijing, China

(Note: The author of this review wrote the original novel upon which this film is based)

Original Novel: *Killing Time in Beijing* (*Hun zai Beijing*)

Setting: Chinese intellectual life 1985-92

Major Characters: Young bohemians in a Beijing publishing house

Plot: Their day to day misfortunes in a communal building

Published: Bei Fang Literature & Art Press, June1993

Reissued: China Social Sciences Press, June 2000

German Publication: *Verloren in Peking* by Eichborn Verlag, Fall 1996

Film Adaptation: *Strangers in Beijing*, 1995, directed by He Qun. Winner of three national prizes (1996 Baihua Prize): Best Film, Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor

Killing Time in Beijing is a satirical novel about a group of young Beijing artists living in a squalid communal building. This would-be Bohemian group is made up of painters, critics, poets, and translators who work as editors for a state-owned publishing house. They migrated to Beijing from destitute provinces and are thus known as immigrants, and their city home "the immigrant building."

The novel records their frustrations with bureaucracy, and the torment wrought on them by the slings and arrows of day to day misfortune. Chaos in the communal kitchen, desperately selfish and hard-nosed attitudes towards a most unsanitary communal toilet, and neighbors, from whom privacy is preserved only by paper walls and furniture, are the elements which overload an already precarious lifestyle.

Better housing is sought after, but limited. Only officials and senior editors are assigned desirable dwelling space. So the young residents of the "immigrant building" seem damned to a pitiless and sordid existence. They have no alternatives because in such a welfare state everything is controlled by the Dan Wei, or work unit.

The stuff of their everyday lives is interwoven with observations of social, political and cultural activity in Beijing and the state.

The publishing house that is their Dan Wei is a designated Party "mouthpiece," thus everything they do is inevitably, however subtly, tainted by politics.

With quirky and uproarious satire on both the bureaucracy and the helpless intellectuals who succumb to such human conditions and behave disgracefully - lie with each other for a pitiful single room in a filthy communal building, curry favor with the bureaucracy and behave as courtiers - the novel proves to be a caricature on Beijing intellectual life. But the author quotes from the Bible to express his sympathy for these people, of whom he is one: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The novel itself was poignant and its language irritated many people. And so it was rejected by some publishers and literary magazines in the nation's capital, Beijing, as "not proper for publication." But finally the novel was published in a remote province away from Beijing.

Taking the political restrictions into consideration, the author had some fear that the adaptation to film might be an arduous task. So he found it more sensible not to do the adaptation work and left it to the director.

The director, He Qun, a classmate of the internationally renowned directors Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, managed the job with quite a bit of skill. He knew what he wanted to achieve. During an interview with Hong Kong's Star TV, he had acknowledged that he really liked the novel and couldn't help making a film out of it. But the state control over the media is far tighter than over literature, so the film could not be as satirical and critical as the novel, otherwise it would have been censored before it could have made any public appearance. A politically "wrong" film which is censored actually means a commercial failure - all the investment would have sunk. If a director's film fails to make any profit because of censorship, that director is more likely to give up the profession of film directing. It is this vicious circle that the directors in China fear the most.

So the director had made some modifications in tone and plot to ensure that the film could pass the censorship. What's more, among all the entries, as the only "social problem film" of that year (1996) he even managed to have brought the film to pass as an excellent art film. This film had unexpectedly won three nationwide audience-voted prizes, i.e. the Baihua Prize, because of its lukewarm critical tone! The director had really balanced well between censorship and the audience's taste - censorship would always force-out a trenchantly critical film; but the audience would always demand that a realistic film be critical in tone. A lukewarm film seemed to satisfy both, ensuring *The Strangers in Beijing*'s success both politically and thus commercially.

Three Seasons

Dir: Tony Bui, 1999

A review by Roopa Chauhan, University of Nottingham, UK

In *Three Seasons*, his first film, Tony Bui paints a richly textured portrait of contemporary Vietnam. Set in Saigon, *Three Seasons* was the first American production to be given permission to film entirely on location in Vietnam. The film was a great success at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival, capturing the Audience Award as well as prizes for Best Cinematography and Best Dramatic Film. It weaves together four tales. Each story is unique and self-contained but the underlying theme in all four is the same: reconciliation and redemption. The central question driving the separate narrative threads appears to be: can we become more than who we are? The response the film offers us is Yes, but only through meaningful contact with an "other" and/or the world around us can we transcend our material, bodily condition.

The characters in the stories exist on the fringes of Vietnam's burgeoning economy. Kien (Ngoc Hiep Nguyen) sells lotus flowers for a living. Teacher Dao, a poet, owns the Lotus pond where Kien works. Hai (Dong Duong) is a cyclo driver. Lan (Zoe Bui) is a prostitute. Woody (Huy Duoc Nguyen), a little boy, sells cigarettes, chewing gum, lighters and other trinkets to people on the street. And James Hager (Harvey Keitel), an American Vietnam veteran, tries to find his Amerasian daughter, Phuong (Lola Gulmond). The stories and characters are of the type we've seen many times before, in other American films about Vietnam, in Dickens' novels and even in Italian neorealist films such as those by De Sica (see Appendix One). However, Bui manages to bring out their humanity in such a subtle way that they manage to transcend the clichés. Of course Liza Rinzler's stunning cinematography, namely her command of light and colour, contributes a great deal to this process as she captures the distinctive qualities of the three seasons represented: the stifling heat and sun of the dry season; the overwhelming downpours of the wet season; and the lush greens of the growth season. Originally the film was shot as a triptych but the director "found they had greater strength and resonance by intertwining them and letting the stories all take off at once" (Yabroff, 1999). This is possible because thematically the stories work well together and Bui's skilful editing provides the necessary continuity and flow that enables them to hang together as a whole.

The film opens with the arrival of Kien, a young country girl, at a lotus farm in Saigon. She is immediately taken to her room and told about the strict rules that govern the workers. They have to wake up very early, pick the lotuses of which the owner, Teacher Dao, is very proud and then spend the entire day selling them in the city. The following day we see Kien struggling to keep up with other workers as they walk to the Lotus pond. She finds it difficult with the heavy baskets she must carry. She seems frazzled and a bit overwhelmed until she gazes upon the Lotus pond for the first time. The close up of her face shows how the sight before her transforms her irritation to enchantment. Then there is a cut to the lotus pond filled with the fragrant white flowers at the center of which lies a dark, mysterious temple. Unable

to heed the advice of her co-worker, who says that she must try to forget the temple is there, Kien is captivated not just by the temple but by the magical atmosphere it lends to the pond. The song the workers sing that day about the purity of the lotus that grows in the mud yet does not smell of mud sets the tone for the rest of the film. The lotus flowers are a metaphor for the characters in the film who, despite the difficult circumstances in which they find themselves, are able to rise above the everyday filth and poverty (spiritual and material) that permeates their lives. The lotus also represents the country of Vietnam as it finally wakes from the nightmare of its violent history and begins a process of regeneration.

The film is replete with images of regeneration and renewal as the cycle of seasons equally represent the cycle of birth and death. The lotus flowers provide the tenuous thread that holds the entire film together. When Kien secretly ventures into the temple she discovers the mystery at the heart of the place. It is a refuge for Teacher Dao who has not left the temple since leprosy crippled him. Touched by his story, Kien attempts to shake him out his complacency. "Is that why you hide in the shadows?" she asks. He does not see himself as "hiding" as such and responds:

> Every morning my ears escape these windows to embrace the song of the birds. My nose pierces these walls and naps in the fragrance of my lotuses. With every sunrise and sunset my eyes flutter into the air and my heart -- my heart has transcended above the bondage of man.

Encouraged by Teacher Dao's unexpected openness towards her, she takes a sheet of his poetry and starts to read. He quickly interrupts her to finish the poem:

> Unveil the darkness that over me hangs/Upon a lake of lotuses I wish to be/Scenting the day's breath with fragrance and poetry/Searching the wind for traces of my former spirit/The discovery of my reflected present can I see.

As he speaks, he emerges from the shadows. Kien steps back, slightly pained by the extent to which leprosy has disfigured him. She stays, however and tries to reconcile the beauty of what she hears with what is before her. It was the last poem he wrote before he lost his fingers to leprosy. Deeply moved, Kien offers to lend Teacher Dao her own fingers. This act of coming together in order to become whole again and to recover what has been lost is also an underlying theme in all the stories.

Lan, the prostitute with whom Hai (the cyclo driver) falls in love, tells him about her youth when she went to school in a diaphanous white *ao dai*. During the summer season, the trees lining the street would blossom, ripen and then fall to the ground in a shower of bright red petals. Like the poet, Lan cannot face living in her present reality. Instead she immerses herself in nostalgia for the past and her hopes for the future. She dreams of belonging to the world of ease and comfort represented by the modern hotels:

> It's a different world in there. They're not like us. They have a different talk, a different walk. The sun rises for people like them not for us. We live in their shadows and it grows bigger with each new hotel built.

She does not want the fast pace at which society seems to be moving to eclipse her. Just as Teacher Dao tries to escape his condition she seeks to rise above her circumstances using whatever means she has at her disposal. Her desire for social mobility is a different one from

the poet's dream, but at the center of both lies the same impulse to achieve a sense of completion by becoming whole. In the film this necessarily involves an act of purification that can lead one to a former state of innocence. To this end Hai serves the same purpose in Lan's life as Kien serves in Teacher Dao's life. He completes her and helps her move beyond her recent past as a prostitute and recover that which is most important to her, her youth and purity.

The two other "couples" in the story mirror the first two. Woody, a bright-eyed, shrewd, but vulnerable little boy, loses his case and consequently his only means of survival. But on his quest to get it back he inadvertently becomes the hero of an American western, *High Plains Drifter* (1973), when he enters the back of a makeshift movie hall. Thrilled with his discovery he begins to play "Cowboys and Indians" along with the characters on the screen when he falls and accidentally rips a hole through the screen. The film continues to be projected, much to the amusement of the spectators, onto Woody. Before the owners get a hold of him the audience help him escape. In this comic scene Bui engages with the discourse surrounding the way Vietnam has been represented in American films about the war. It has often been said that the American GI's going to Vietnam took with them images of westerns from the forties and fifties and that they then projected these images onto the country of Vietnam (Anderegg, 1991; Dittmar and Michaud, 1990: 1-40); Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is a famous example of a film that deals with this process (the scene I have in mind is when a journalist films the troops and the solders make references to John Wayne and shout out, "This is Vietnam, the movie!"). Quite obviously, Woody's act of tearing a hole in the screen functions as a subversive one on the narrative level. It in a sense criticises the transposition of an American imaginary onto a Vietnamese landscape.

Woody's search for his case leads to other discoveries as well, most notably that of a friend who lands in front of him as she is thrown out of a restaurant. Bui captures the encounter of these two rejected orphans with humor. She smiles sweetly at Woody, who does not quite know what to make of her, and follows him around, despite his irritation, dragging her bag full of clanking, empty aluminum cans. Only when he finds his case in the hands of a drunk American passed out in an alley, is he finally able to accept her hand of friendship.

The theme of reconciliation continues with James Hager, the Vietnam veteran, searching for his daughter. The cyclo driver notices him sitting, alone on the sidewalk, staring at the restaurant across the street. "It used to be a GI bar," Hai informs his fellow cyclo drivers. James too has lost something and has come to salvage whatever he can so that he can "finally make some sort of peace with this place." When he finally does meet his daughter, Phuong, he buys a bundle of lotuses from Kien to bring her. After receiving the lotuses Phuong warms up to him and allows him to talk about his past and in his own way make up for abandoning her. He too wants to move beyond the confines placed on him by his own tragic history. While the other actors give strong performances, Harvey Keitel's own as James is not among his best. At times his lines fall flat, but he is able to capture with a certain tenderness the loss experienced by James and his desire to make amends.

Redemption and forgiveness move the narrative of this poetic film forward and as the characters connect with others around them they are able to let go of the recent past that weighs them down so they can accept the present while looking forward to the future. Teacher Dao's final words to Kien are: "I had forgotten my youth the only time I was pure and whole until I heard your song." She sings it to him for the last time. The words "how many leaves must a silkworm eat to make a dress of colors from the past" reflect the idea that

what is pure, whole, full of life, color, good and bad must be remembered in order to build a future, not weigh down the present. *Three Seasons* gives a highly idealized view of contemporary Vietnam and it provides the viewer with stunning images of a country just opening up to the rest of the world. Yet one cannot help but wonder if this image of a Vietnam peacefully coming to terms with its past is not seen through a rose tinted lens.

Appendix

One: "Its gorgeous, almost painterly composition shows the influence of Asian cinema, but its unsparing and deeply compassionate portrayal of city life, viewed from the bottom up, owes a debt to Italian neorealism, especially to the greatest of all urban-poverty films, Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*." (O'Hehir, 1999. Online.)

References:

Anderegg, Michael (1991) *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud (eds) (1990) *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

O'Heir, Andrew (1999) Poetry in Motion. Online. http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/1999/05/07seasons/index.html

Yabroff, Jennie (1999) Harvey Keitel and the Sundance Kid: An Interview with *Three Seasons* director Tony Bui. Online. http://www.salon.com.ent/movies/int/1999/03/18int.html

Tropical Fish

Dir: Chen Yu-shun, 1995

A review by Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley and Gary D. Rawnsley, University of Nottingham, UK

The delightful comedy *Tropical Fish* (*Redai yu*) was the debut of a young Taiwanese director, Chen Yu-shun, and marked his transition from television to movies. The hero of the movie is A-chiang, a junior high schoolboy facing tremendous pressure to pass the annual entrance examination for entrance to senior high school. A-chiang has been struggling with his grades, and he has suffered the many punishments meted out by his disappointed father and strict school teacher.

A-chiang finds refuge in his imagination. Since he was a child, he has been fantasising about a superhero, King Saloman, and his rival, One-Thousand-Year-Old Golden Shark. A-chiang might have read or heard the story a long time ago, or perhaps he just made it up in order to amuse himself, but somewhere down the line he has come to believe in it. Throughout the movie, A-chiang's daydreams become entangled with reality, creating surreal humour. We see A-chiang (dreaming of himself as King Saloman) accidentally kidnapped by two gangsters (representing the Golden Shark) as a result of his attempt to rescue a little boy, Dao-nan, whom the gangsters meant to kidnap in the first place. Unfortunately, though, Dao-nan's stepfather does not want him back, so A-chiang becomes the kidnappers, only potential source of ransom money.

The ill-tempered first kidnapper dies in a car accident. The second kidnapper (played by another famous young Taiwanese movie director, Lin Cheng-sheng), clearly not as professional as the deceased, panics and decides to take the two boys to his family in a rural seaside village. The family become accessories to the crime. By this time, the annual entrance examination is only a few days away, and A-chiang's parents make several emotional television interviews to plea for their son's safe return, thus moving the kidnappers to negotiate the ransom with A-chiang's parents. More than that, the kidnappers try to help A-chiang study for his impending exams. Although A-chiang, Dao-nan and the second kidnapper have a lot of fun together at the seaside, A-chiang's heart is broken when he sees on television that the school girl he secretly pines after (Princess Mermaid) is "captured" by a screen idol, Lu Fei (King Saloman's other sworn enemy, Sea Devil.)

Chen Yu-shun has dedicated this movie to "all daydreamers" because he believes that "dreams make life beautiful." As A-chiang discovers, however, as we grow up each dream we have is like a bubble that may burst at any time. Yet Chen believes that as long as we can keep having dreams, like endless little bubbles that never stop rising from the bottom of the sea, reality will never beat us down and there will always be hope. And indeed, the reality that is reflected in this movie is far from up-lifting. Chen's sarcastic portrait of modern Taiwanese society -- government and police incompetence, corruption, double standards -- may be presented in a farcical manner, but in fact it constitutes sharp observations on social reality. The film's subtext reminds its audience that without dreams, and the determination to

realise them, Taiwan's "miracle" would never have happened. Taiwan's economic miracle was followed by a peaceful political transition to democracy that began in the mid-1980s and culminated with the election of the new president in 2000. Taiwan remains chaotic with many social problems to resolve, but at the same time it is brimming with energy and potential. Should the people believe that the dream can continue? Should the people of Tiawan believe in themselves?

Clearly, Chen Yu-shun is a believer. He believes in dreams and hopes, as well as the innate goodness of human nature. So, we grow to sympathise with the kidnappers as the story develops. They are greedy, but they are not evil. *Tropical Fish* is not like many movies in the anti-hero genre which try to claim that the "bad guys" are victims of society or the system. These kidnappers commit crimes as a result of their own greedy desires, but they are able to try to do something decent nevertheless. In other words, *Tropical Fish* is not about rebellion against the society or the system. Chen Yu-shun's main concern here is not with why generally decent people become criminals; rather his theme is how people keep their faith and remain positive when things slide from bad to worse.

A-chiang tells Dao-nan a second fairy tale: Lying at the bottom of the sea, there is a fish which only eats the dreams of little children. When it has eaten 9999 dreams, the fish will fly out of the water at dawn and become a Thousand-Year-Old Fish Spirit. Early one morning, as A-chiang, Dao-nan and the second kidnapper watch the sun rise over the ocean, a helicopter suddenly ascends from nowhere and flies over them. When his ordeal has ended, Dao-nan must go to an orphanage, but he does not feel despair. He begins to tell people how the fairytale told to him by A-chiang came true right in front of his eyes. A-chiang has passed his dreams and hopes onto little Dao-nan, transforming him into a believer as well.

Chen Yu-shun started his career as a trainee in television and advertising. *Tropical Fish* is his debut as a movie director and scriptwriter. Thanks to his years of training in television, Chen felt at ease working with film crews, actors and the camera. Viewers will be pleased with the way his confidence and easy-going attitude shine through. Chen has admitted that in filming *Tropical Fish* he did not harbour any ambition to shoot a great epic; all that he wanted to do was to tell a good story with identifiable characters. Chen Yu-shun has certainly achieved that goal.

Xiu-Xiu the Sent Down Girl

Dir: Joan Chen, 1999

A review by Xiaoling Zhang, The University of Nottingham, UK

Banned on Mainland China for its political and sexual content, *Xiu-Xiu the Sent Down Girl* is the directorial debut of the Chinese-born actress Joan Chen who established herself in the West through her role in the Oscar-award winning *The Last Emperor* (1987). It tells the tragic story of Wen Xiu, or Xiu-Xiu (Lu Lu), a fifteen year old girl from the city of Chengdu, who is sent down to a remote corner of the Sichuan steppes bordering Tibet in 1975, towards the end of the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966 1976).

Xiu-Xiu, which is adapted from Yang Geling's novella *Heavenly Bath* (*Tian Yu*), is set against the background of such a tumultuous period of Chinese history that a political interpretation of the film is inevitable. Certainly, it may be added to the list of powerful and stirring contemporary titles which engage with grand political movements in China, such as *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993), and *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1994) even if these are more powerful and stirring than Chen's directorial debut. Yet *Xiu-Xiu* is a devastating and unforgettable portrait of hopeless love and the corruption of innocence set against the background of the Cultural Revolution. It exposes the exploitation of the "educated youth" in the regimented Communist system and ridicules callous bureaucrats, ideologues, and ruthless self-seekers.

The film opens with Wen Xiu being "assigned" to the countryside together with her friends. As she starts her journey, a loudspeaker broadcasts songs such as "Liberated Slaves Missing Chairman Mao" and slogans like "Go to the Countryside, Go to the Borderlands, Go to Places Where Our Motherland Most Needs Us! To Go and Grow Roots, Flowers and Bear Fruits." Amidst younger children dancing and parents shedding tears, Wen Xiu and her companions gleefully receive their parkas, climb onto a truck, and bravely set out on a journey to be "re-educated by the peasants, to save the world's two thirds population who are still in deep water and hot fire."

The film shows what it is like to live under authoritarian rule and reveals how human nature can become twisted under psychological and spiritual pressures. Brought up doing "whatever the Party asks," Wen Xiu dutifully obeys her orders. After one year's diligent toil in a work camp, she is sent for six months training in horse riding and herding in order to eventually lead an illustrious Iron Girls' Cavalry in the plains of Tibet. Her trainer is Lao Jin (Lopsang), a loner and expert horseman who lost his manhood in a Tibetan tribal war. In spite of the loneliness and all the inconveniences, such as having to share one tent with Lao Jin, the first six months spent on the plains are idyllic, with the tent set among fields of vivid wildflowers under blue skies. The months pass. Cut off from the rest of the world, Wen Xiu hardly realizes that the outside world has changed completely (with Mao's death and the downfall of the "Gang of Four"). She never considers the possibility of being either forgotten or abandoned by those who sent her. A wandering peddler had told her that the "educated

youth" have long since been disbanded and everyone is scrambling for return permits home. Those whose families have connections or money have already left for the city and got jobs there. Young women without such advantageous associations often trade their sexuality. In her naivety Wen Xiu believes that this young man, who is also from Chengdu, loves her, has connections, and will help them get back to Chengdu together. She accepts an apple from the peddler, a symbol of poisonous attraction. However, her illusions are ruthlessly shattered when the peddler uses her sexually and then recommends her to another man, and then another man. The rank of the men who abuse her becomes increasingly higher, as shown by the means of transport they use - from an ox cart to a motorbike to a tractor - and also by their manner towards Lao Jin, which ranges from trying to converse with him to completely ignoring his existence. Circumstances transform Wen Xiu from a precocious schoolgirl in pigtails who could not sleep the first night she shares the tent with Lao Jin to a degraded woman who washes herself in front of Lao Jin without shame.

The film condemns severely the beastly side of human nature during this particular period. Apart from Lao Jin, who has lost his manhood, every man Wen Xiu comes across is a beast -- the local petty cadres, the wandering peddler who is from the same city, the three-toed Zhang who shoots himself in order to get back to the city. They all take advantage of the situation and use Wen Xiu as the object of their sexual desires. Females -- including an accountant, as well as doctors and nurses -- have no sympathy for her plight. We see the shadow of death looming nearby even in the happy days before her six months training comes to an end. When Lao digs a bath for her, she playfully remarks that it looks like a place for a coffin. It finally becomes her last resting-place, far from the maddening crowd.

To understand Wen Xiu's longing to go back to the city where she was born and brought up, one needs to understand the insurmountable wall between city-dwellers and rural people in China before Deng Xiaoping's reforms of the early 1980s. It is certainly the case that the government would not appreciate the image presented by this film. Chinese leaders over the years have adopted many policies that resulted in a caste of privileged urbanites against a rural caste of have nots. The urban caste became a superior class because they were entitled to a reasonably subsidized urban lifestyle, while the rural caste was bound to land by their rural registration. There was an enforced schism, or "bamboo wall," between urbanites and peasants as a result of policies highly favorable to the former. Furthermore, internal migration was impossible until Deng abolished Maoist restrictions on internal travel. Given the focus of the film, it is necessary to understand this historical backdrop in order fully to understand the longing Wen Xiu and other "educated youth" feel for their hometown.

As *Xiu-Xiu* was shot in China without a legal permit, Chen and her crew went to great pains to be able to capture the beauty of Tibet. They had to select locations that were not only visually appealing but also where the crew would not be betrayed by the locals. Some of the most visually arresting moments include the recapture of the Maoist street scenes in Chendu and shots of the sparse Tibetan mountain region. However, all the trouble has paid off, for the aesthetic effect of setting the brutality of the officials under the sun and against scenes of great natural beauty is absolutely stunning. While Chen condemns in her film rigid revolutionary dictates and limitations, western audiences may find it hard to comprehend the passivity of its protagonists, their submission to their fates, and their unquestioning obedience to and respect for apparent superiors. The film's outlook is very different from Zhang Yimou's recent *Not One Less* (1999), which also focuses on childhood experiences in its depiction of a thirteen-year-old girl teaching class to pupils no younger than herself. The stubbornness she shows in looking for a boy missing from school, as well as her independent

spirit, are quite striking. Her generation is certainly different from the generation born and brought up during the time of the Cultural Revolution.