

Global Politics and a Cinema of Localism: Contemporary Taiwanese Film

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Abstract

In the opening sequence of Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No. 7* (*Hai Jiao Qi Hao*) (2008), the lead character Aga smashes a guitar against a lamppost while shouting 'Fuck you Taipei.' He then leaves the city on his motorbike and turning his back on the metropolis, heads down Highway Number One toward the southern county of Pingtung. This is a brief moment of populist politics in the film, and Aga's rejection of a 'false' Taipei identity in favour of a more 'true' local identity relates to contemporary Taiwan's contested political identity.

The People's Republic of China, which officially considers Taiwan a province of the mainland, insists that the world deny Taiwan independent nation status in international venues, considering Taiwan as encompassed by China under a 'One China, Two Systems' policy. In *Cape No. 7*, Aga's cry becomes a means of denying that reductive imago of Taipei as province of China/Taipei as representative of all Taiwan. By translocating its story to Pingtung's ethnically diverse and linguistically polyglot local communities, the film articulates a comprehensive and encompassing conception of Taiwan that is posed in opposition to Mandarin speaking 'Chinese Taipei'. The film promotes a Taiwanese identity that consists of a diversity of political and cultural forms: Han Chinese as well as Hokklo, Hakka, aboriginal and immigrant. This paper explores the search for 'the local' in contemporary Taiwanese populist cinema.

Keywords: Taiwan, sovereignty, nationalism, cinema studies, politics, localism, zhonghua studies

Introduction

In the opening sequence of Wei Te-sheng's *Cape No. 7 (Hai Jiao Qi Hao)* (2008), the lead character Aga smashes a guitar against a lamppost while shouting 'Fuck you Taipei.' He then leaves the city on his motorbike and turning his back on the metropolis, heads down Highway Number One toward the southern county of Pingtung. This moment of rage against Taipei struck a chord with contemporary Taiwanese, as it symbolized in the film the character's splitting allegiance from cosmopolitan Taipei to a more rural/local experience of *Taiwanese*ness. This is a brief moment of populist politics in the film, and Aga's rejection of a 'false' Taipei identity in favour of a more 'true' local identity relates to contemporary Taiwan's contested political identity.

The *People's Republic of China*, which officially considers Taiwan a province of the mainland, insists that the world deny Taiwan independent nation status in international venues, considering Taiwan as encompassed by China under a 'One China, Two Systems' policy. Lowell Dittmer (2004) discusses Taiwan's contested status:

Taiwan's case is distinctive, for despite having some of the features of a nation-state, its quest for sovereignty has been vigorously contested by the People's Republic of China (PRC), which claims the island as a long-lost Chinese province.

Dittmer continues, citing Beijing as being 'unhappy with Taiwan's quest for national identity' (475). Part of this denial of Taiwan's quest for national cultural identity, is to insist on the depiction of Taiwan in international venues as a subordinate province of China, called *Chinese Taipei*. Such was the case in the 2008 and 2012 Olympics in Beijing and London respectively. Taiwan was even forced to substitute the flag of the *Republic of China* (ROC) with a dedicated *Chinese Taipei* sports flag. The imposed term, *Chinese Taipei* has the double function of reducing the entire island to a single city and then subsuming that city into greater Chinese national and cultural identities, thereby denying Taiwanese *cultural* specificity. Under such rhetoric, Taiwan becomes stripped of political national identity and cultural mythos.

In *Cape No. 7*, Aga's cry becomes a filmic means of challenging the orthodox presentation of Taipei as synecdochic of the entire country of Taiwan. Taiwanese news media during the time of the Olympics became dominated by the debate regarding Taiwan's right to a national identity, and the population became agitated by this diminishment of Taiwanese cultural autonomy in the international arenas of sport and pageantry. In *Cape No. 7*, Aga's cry becomes a means of denying that reductive imago of Taipei as province of China/Taipei as representative of all Taiwan. By translocating its story to Pingtung's ethnically diverse and linguistically polyglot local communities, the film articulates a comprehensive and encompassing conception of Taiwan that is posed in opposition to Mandarin speaking 'Chinese Taipei'. The film promotes a Taiwanese identity that consists of a diversity of political and cultural forms: Han Chinese as well as Hokklo, Hakka, aboriginal and immigrant. Through its focus on the local experience of a diverse group of Taiwanese identities, the film contests the enforced signification of Mainland China's one nation, two systems ideology as perpetuated by the totalizing *Chinese Taipei* moniker.

Taiwan is currently at a crossroads, a not-quite-a nation, with two potential identities. Domestic politics can be split neatly into two ‘camps:’ the Kuomintang (KMT) party and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The two camps have differing ideologies regarding Taiwan’s status, which can be roughly characterized in the following way. The first, favoured by the KMT, is that Taiwan is a political entity officially known as the *Republic of China* (ROC) which was politically separated from the Mainland during the Communist revolution of 1949 and should be considered as historically and culturally contiguous with China. The second, favoured by the DPP, is that the island should be considered an autonomous political entity known as Taiwan, and which has a modern history and culture that is unique and distinct from that of Modern China. But the question of reunification is problematized by cultural affiliation, and while the KMT has a propensity to favour Mandarin Chinese cultural identification, the DPP has promoted a more pluralistic conception of Taiwanese-ness that includes Hakka, Hokklo and aboriginal identifications. The film *Cape No. 7* while avoiding overt politicization, through its emphasis on the pluralism engendered in Taiwan’s local communities, ultimately engages in a discourse of identity politics. The film, because of its popularity, triggered a number of subsequent films that similarly investigate Taiwanese pluralism by siting their stories in local communities outside of the Metropolis Taipei.

Cape No. 7, produced after the DPP era of Taiwan-centric campaigning, struck a chord with local audiences and went on to become the highest grossing Taiwanese film. According to the *Taipei Times*, *Cape No. 7* generated domestic revenue of 530 million Taiwanese dollars – approximately \$17 million US (“Night Market Hero to Wow China.” 2013, p. 2). The film failed to replicate that same success in either the Mainland or Chinese communities of the diaspora, in large part, because much of the film’s politics seems to appeal predominantly to elements of Taiwanese society that do not similarly appeal to other Chinese speaking or Chinese heritage communities. It seems the film, in its attempt to articulate a specifically *Taiwanese* local experience, failed to appeal to non-Taiwanese, Chinese language communities. The film’s domestic success was big enough, however, that it triggered a small flurry of films that similarly occur outside of Mandarin Chinese speaking Taipei and have a concern for local issues among rural Taiwan’s culturally and linguistically heterogeneous population.

Cape No. 7 and the several similar films produced in its wake, if not posing a case for political sovereignty, belong to a movement that attempts to articulate Taiwanese national/cultural identities as distinct and separate from those of the mainland. This paper argues that an emphasis on pluralism and localism in Taiwanese culture is part of a *discourse of localism* that is in direct opposition to the global community’s insistence on Taiwan’s undefined political status. As Beijing promotes a global myth of Taipei/Taiwan as part of a One China policy, this new cinema of localism is part of a proto-nationalist Cinema that emphasizes a uniquely Taiwanese set of national/cultural tropes derived from (shared) local experiences that exist outside of the metropolis of Taipei. In many of these films, Taipei is seen as the centre of the Kuomintang Sinicization policies and it is outside of the administrative capital that a grassroots campaign promoting Taiwanese local identities is being mounted. Much contemporary Taiwanese cinema, made in the aftermath of the administration of former President Chen Shuei-Bian (2000-2008) and the Democratic Progressive Party’s emphasis on Taiwanese localism, is highly political in its construction of

*Taiwanese*ness and articulation of Taiwan as a pluralistic cultural entity separate and distinct from the mythic homogeneity promulgated by both mainland China and the previous and contemporary Kuomintang governments. This article explores the imagined Taiwanese local identity as expressed through a series of films released after *Cape No. 7*, most notably *No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti (Bu Neng Meiyou Ni / Cannot Live Without You)* (2009) *Monga* (2010) and *Night Market Hero (Ji Pai Ying Xiong)* (2011).

Taiwan is Not a Sovereign Nation

On Saturday June 29, 2013, the former Premier of the Republic of China Hau Pei-tsun, speaking at a forum organized by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy addressed the room and boldly declared that ‘*Taiwan is not a sovereign nation,*’ ultimately rejecting the name *Taiwan* and insisting that unification between *The People’s Republic of China* and the *Republic of China (Taiwan)* was an inevitability. The insistence that Taiwan is *not* a sovereign nation is a contentious one because Taiwan is a *de facto* sovereign political entity with democratically elected leadership and a sovereign economy. While Taiwan does indeed enjoy both economic and political autonomy, Taiwanese ‘nationness’ is problematized because Taiwan is not recognized by the United Nations and is yet to achieve officially approved nation status within the global community. Sigrid Winkler (2011) reports that Taiwan’s 23 million people have only been granted observer status by the World Health Organization and do not contribute to global health policy, as do other recognized nations (1). The Taiwanese political identity is one that is routinely diminished in global fora, with mainland China insisting on Taiwan being considered a special administrative region, but none-the-less a province of China. Wang and Liu (2004) discuss the reunification question.

Unlike the Korean and the German models of unification in which each side treats the other substantially as an equal, the PRC model, known as ‘one country two systems,’ considers Taiwan only as a local government under Beijing’s command, like Hong Kong and Macao, but one that will enjoy a high degree of autonomy. (568)

But this ambiguous political status is not only contested in international arenas, but also by factions within the island itself and is regularly made manifest in charged political debate, as evidenced by Hau’s contentious statements. Lowell Dittmer argues there are three possible futures for democratic Taiwan:

- (1) The formation of a national identity as an independent and sovereign Taiwan, eventually a Republic of Taiwan with its own constitution and flag.
- (2) The retention of the identity of the Republic of China, tracing its legitimacy (and sovereignty) back to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution. While no longer claiming to be the sole representative of ‘China’ in the world, this option continues to adhere to the ‘one-China principle,’ in the sense that there is said to be only ‘one Chinese nation’ but, for the time being, two separate states, whose reunification might eventually be negotiated under mutually acceptable conditions.
- (3) The status quo, which is no real ‘solution,’ but merely a protraction of the current identity crisis, consisting of *de facto* autonomy without either reunification or independence. (Dittmer, 2004, p. 477)

The Kuomintang government has long promoted the second option and has similarly promulgated the one China two systems policy that posits eventual re-

unification as not only a desired goal, but as an inevitability, a position vocalized by Hau.

Hau, in his lecture continued, arguing that to call the Republic of China, *Taiwan*, and to insist upon its political sovereignty were both ‘forms of self-depreciation’ (Shih, 2013, p.1). In his speech, Hau argued that the world does not recognize Taiwan as a sovereign nation, and that any such campaigning toward sovereignty would undermine cross-strait unification, the end goal of the previous Kuomintang administration under Chiang Kai-shek, and often feared by the Taiwanese nationalists to be the final motive of the current KMT administration under President Ma Ying-jeou. Hau is quoted as stating “There is no democratic country in the world that has two different democratic systems. When people of both sides of the Strait have a consensus on their political system, unification will come to fruition naturally” (Shih, 2013, p.1).

For the 95 year old Hau, his conception of the ROC is rooted in the ideology of the Kuomintang party as promulgated by former dictator Chiang Kai-shek and his son Chiang Ching-kuo that posited the People’s Republic of China under Mao Tse-tung was an illegitimate government and that Taiwan was the seat of the ROC in exile. Such an argument also posits both historical and cultural superiority of Han Chinese over those who are born as indigenously Taiwanese, arguing that to promote Taiwanese distinctiveness or to reject the one China principle are to ‘deprecate the self.’ Hau’s language is a language of hierarchies, in which Chinese political affiliation and consequently Chinese cultural affiliation are superior to local identities, thereby himself deprecating Taiwanese Aboriginal, Hakka or Hokklo identifications, identifications that *Cape No. 7*, as does much contemporary Taiwanese cinema, celebrates. Hau’s is a conception of Taiwan that stems from the Chiang Kai-shek era of an enforced Sinicization program.

For Hau and the KMT, the Republic of China is understood to be a nation that is culturally and historically contiguous with that of the mainland, but this is not the case for many Taiwanese. For many Taiwanese who speak the southern dialect Hokklo, a derivative of Hokkien and a language that is not homologous with Mandarin Chinese, cultural identification comes from a Taiwan centric ideology. Further, Taiwan also comprises Hakka, who migrated from Guangdong, and many aboriginal peoples who do not identify with a Mandarin based Sinocentric ideology. Such a diversity of people appears in the film *Cape No. 7*, with representative Hakka, Hokklo, Aboriginal and Christian characters. The film creates a contrastive conception of Taiwan that is opposed to the reductive Sinocentrism promoted by Hau and old-guard KMT. While Hau is correct in identifying the problem of Taiwan’s political status as being contingent on approval by the global community – and indeed Taiwan does not enjoy Nation status – his conceit of Taiwan being politically at one with China predates his (mis)conception of Taiwan as a *cultural* entity which is concomitantly morphologically at one with the Mainland. His discourse is to actively deny the local cultural distinctiveness of Taiwanese pluralism, pluralism which contemporary Taiwanese cinema aggressively promotes through characterization and celebration of local identity and custom.

Hau’s conception of Taiwanese nationalism as a form of ‘self-depreciation’ is one that has become anachronistic and no longer conforms to the beliefs of the majority of the

nation, but is one that is still held by many in the Kuomintang party. Under the Democratic Progressive Party administration of former President Chen Shui-bian (2000-2008) Taiwan was swept by a nationalist movement that spread awareness of the need to create greater political and cultural sovereignty. Writing in that period, Wang and Liu contend that desire to assert cultural and political independence from China, a new Taiwanese national identity has been engendered, stating “this identity rejects the idea that Taiwan and China are one nation and that all ethnic Chinese must be ruled by a single government within the same state.” (2004, p. 570)

In 2004, Wang and Liu conducted a survey of current trends in self-identification in Taiwan with a telephone survey of 1, 115 respondents, asking the respondents questions of self-identification. In their research, Wang and Liu conclude that while many Taiwanese identify as culturally descended from Chinese, concluding that most don't identify as politically Chinese with only one fourth viewing Taiwanese culture as distinct and different from Chinese culture (p. 575). However, despite the feeling of shared cultural heritage, the majority of Taiwanese do not feel politically affiliated with the mainland:

Despite intensive efforts to re-Sinicize the island's residents in the 1948-1988 period, very few of the island's residents currently subscribe to the idea of greater Chinese nationalism. The majority of the populace now sees the island as an independent political entity from the Chinese mainland. More important, half of the island's residents now carefully distinguish their political identification from their cultural orientation. (p. 578)

While the majority see Taiwanese culture as descended from Chinese culture, a quarter of the population feels otherwise. And though most contemporary Taiwanese are happy to acknowledge a common Chinese heritage, they identify themselves as politically Taiwanese. Further, there is a significant proportion of the society that does not identify itself as of Chinese heritage at all, and instead identify as aboriginal and who belong to one of the fourteen recognized aboriginal tribes. Wang and Liu conclude their findings:

This research has shown that Taiwan-centered national identities, including both the Taiwanese nationalist identity and the pro-Taiwan identity, are now dominant on the island. While those who hold such identities are divided in views of their cultural heritage, they all exhibit a psychological attachment to a political community known as Taiwan that is separate from the Chinese mainland. More important, a substantial number of island residents now believe they can be both Chinese culturally and Taiwanese politically. (Wang & Liu, 2004, p586)

Contesting Taiwan: One Nation, Two Systems / Separate Histories, Separate Nations

Taiwanese political and cultural affiliations have been contested continuously for several centuries. Taiwan is a small island off the coast of mainland China, whose indigenous people can trace their roots to present day Malay tribes-people. Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley (2011) writes that it wasn't until the 13th century that Chinese settlements appeared in Taiwan. The island was claimed by the Portuguese in the 16th Century, who named the island *Isla Formosa* and who were followed by the Spanish

and the Dutch, all of whom were ejected in 1662 by Zheng Chenggong who was himself at war with the mainland Qing dynasty. Taiwan became a part of the Qing Dynasty with the defeat of Zheng Chenggong in 1683, but did not become an official province of China until 1875. Only twenty years after that, Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese in 1895, where it was administered by Japanese colonial rule for the next fifty years (197). Prior to the arrival of the Japanese, the Chinese inhabitants of Taiwan had emigrated from the Southern provinces and spoke a language derived from Hokkien, a language that was not homologous with the official Mandarin of the Qing court. With the Japanese colonization of Taiwan, the island became further linguistically and culturally separated from Mainland China. The Japanese modernized agrarian Taiwan and brought with them industrial farming practices and heavy machinery. They also built technological and transportation networks and imposed Japanese education, language, customs and culture. In 1945 the Japanese occupation came to an end and Taiwan was ceded to the Mainland, which had recently come under Kuomintang rule lead by Chiang Kai-Shek. This transition, however, was fraught with difficulties. Rawnsley describes disappointment in the people, when “the Nationalist government appointed people from the mainland to almost all administrative and managerial posts in the provincial government” (Rawnsley, 2011, pp. 197-198). Wang and Liu (2004) characterize the transition to Chinese Governance.

The mainland troops sent to take control of the island were viewed by the locals as beggars and thieves. KMT officials in turn viewed the islanders with suspicion, owing to Japanese colonial rule of Taiwan for half a century. After all, they had been on different sides during the war. By 1947, the animosity between the KMT government and Taiwan’s residents culminated in an island wide uprising, known as the ‘2/28 incident,’ during which thousands of local people were massacred by KMT troops. This outbreak of violence solidified the local perception of the KMT as a new alien occupying force, and the ethnic cleavage between ‘mainlanders’ (*waishengren*) and ‘Taiwanese’ (*benshengren*) became the major division within society. (571)

Compounding the local/mainland divide were linguistic and cultural differences. The *benshengren* had been educated in Japanese as the official language, but in private and domestic spheres spoke the southern Hokklo dialect; whereas the KMT military personnel and government administrators, coming from the Mandarin speaking mainland, could speak neither of the local languages. This ideological/cultural division was further compounded in 1949 with the KMT on the mainland being defeated by the communist troops, resulting in Chiang Kai-shek leading an army of two million further *weishengren* to Taiwan to establish the seat of the exiled ROC government in order to retrench and prepare their armies in the attempt to recover the mainland. Wang and Liu argue:

Taipei’s ruling elite imposed harsh authoritarian rule, coupled with intense propaganda efforts to ‘re-Sinicize’ local residents. A variety of measures were enforced to foster a ‘greater China identity,’ in an attempt to make local residents accept the view that both Taiwan and the Chinese mainland were parts of China and that China was their motherland. (2004, p572)

Wang and Liu argue that among the measures of fostering China centred ideology were the imposition of China-related curriculum in schools, a prohibition against the

teaching and speaking of local languages and the restricting of television and radio broadcasts to Chinese Language programming and were practices that continued until the lifting of Martial Law in 1987.

Daniel Lynch makes reference to Chang Yen-hsien, who argued that the Sinicization project had the further effect of *peripheralizing* the Taiwanese subject. Lynch writes “Chang argues that by means of political, economic, and cultural peripheralization, the Qing, Japanese, and Republican Chinese rulers were able to cultivate precisely the passive and ‘tragic’ mind-set among the Taiwanese” (2004, 513-514). The depiction of Taiwanese-ness as secondary to China and Japan, it was feared, would inculcate and indoctrinate the Taiwanese into a hegemonic mindset that would cause willing subjectification to further colonial interests. The Sinicization propaganda campaign was wide-spread and far reaching and such Sino-centric attitudes are still evident today in certain factions of the contemporary KMT, as evidenced by the former Premier Hau Pei-tsun’s speech to the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, that any ideology other than a China-centric belief was to self deprecate.

With the lifting of Martial Law in 1987 and the transition to democracy, came increased debate about identity politics. Wang and Liu report ‘When Lee Teng-hui became the first native-born president in 1988 and later the chairman of the KMT, exiled advocates of Taiwanese independence were allowed to return to the island and openly espouse an independent Taiwan’ (2004, p.572). The increased debate about a politically autonomous Taiwan triggered debates about cultural identity and minority rights. The researchers state that to “maximize electoral votes” and “mitigate the ethnic tension” KMT politicians advocated communalism and harmony with simple sloganeering, championing the ‘collectivity of common fate’ and ‘the rising new nation’ (*xinxing minzu*) (572), concluding that “This discourse integrated all residents on the islands into the more ethnically inclusive identity of ‘the new Taiwanese’ (*xin Taiwanren*)” (Wang & Liu, 2004, p. 572). This *new Taiwanese-ness* was promulgated by the newly formed DPP, who targeted the disenfranchised and incorporated Taiwanese cultural pluralism into its electoral campaigning, arguing that Taiwan’s pluralism and history are independent of China.

The policies of de-Sinicization eventually made their way into education reform in the 1995, with a committee approving a new high school history curriculum titled ‘Knowing Taiwan’ (*Renshi Taiwan*) (Lynch 2004 p. 516), in which ‘Greater Han chauvinism’ was replaced with a Taiwan focussed curriculum (2004, p.516). These changes to curriculum challenged the primacy of the mainland and inevitably created a Taiwan centric ideology and local identity founded on minority discourses including Taiwanese, Hakka and aboriginal concerns. Lynch makes reference to Lee Chiao, President of the Taiwan Pen association, who implores the Taiwanese people reject Sinocentrism, jettisoning it outright in order for a new Taiwanese culture to be erected in its place. “The primacy of this task results from the fact that accepting Chinese culture *by definition* peripheralizes and dwarfs (*aihua*) Taiwan,” (Lynch, 2004, p. 520). While Lee’s insistence on the *total* eradication of Sinocentrism is not shared by the majority of the Taiwanese as demonstrated by Wang and Liu’s survey, Lee’s insistence that Taiwan invest in cultural and ideological distinctiveness had a profound effect and much contemporary Taiwanese cinema is invested in cultural excavation and promoting indigenous heritage and cultural product.

Lynch argues that for Taiwanese nationalists, through the process of imagining and articulating Taiwan as a culturally autonomous entity, it would follow that Taiwan would become a politically autonomous entity and nation status would inevitably be granted. Lynch (2004) argues:

The Taiwanese nationalist project is uniquely ‘Post-Andersonian’ in that its proponents pursue their quest in the transformed intellectual terrain that developed in the wake of the 1983 publication of Benedict Anderson’s contemporary classic, *Imagined Communities*. In this extremely influential book, Anderson argued that no nation is essential and all are constructed through processes of collective imagining. Such a conception of nation-building gives politically engaged Taiwanese intellectuals and other activists’ unusually strong self-confidence in their ability to transform Taiwan into a bona fide nation-state. (p. 513)

In short, if nations are themselves an imaginary construct, the Taiwanese should be able to imagine themselves into a national identity. Through harnessing a population with a shared conception of imagined Taiwanese-ness as culturally blended, diverse or pluralistic; in direct opposition to the sinocentric policies of the KMT, the DPP hoped to galvanize support for a campaign of political sovereignty. The current film movement is exactly such a project to construct a contrastive iteration of *Taiwanese-ness* as culturally distinct and separate from the Mainland, through focussing on local identities and the pluralism of the cultural landscape outside of Sinocentric Taipei. Indeed, Lynch makes reference to Shih Cheng-feng, a political scientist, who goes so far as to state “the Taiwanese Nation (*Taiwan minzu*) refers to all people who love Taiwan, identify with Taiwan, and are willing to struggle for Taiwan regardless of race, ethnicity, or provincial background; the stress is on loving Taiwan, not on the blood and cultural ties of ‘the Chinese Nation’ (*Han minzu*)” (Lynch, 2004, 526). This sentiment appears clearly in the film *Cape No. 7*, which has Taiwanese, Hakka, Hokklo, and Mandarin speakers as well as the character Tomoko, a Japanese expatriate who is seen initially working on a photo-shoot, barking orders in English to a group of Anglo-European models working in Hengchun. Through the course of the film, all the characters learn to love Taiwan and the film ends with a concert that is itself a spectacle of pluralism and cultural blending, incorporating indigenous instruments, Japanese and Taiwanese folk music, and the band’s diverse people are brought together in song. The film posits that it is precisely this pluralism that comprises the New Taiwan.

No Puedo Vivir Sin Ti tells the story of a Kaohsiung single father Li Wu-Hsiung, a dock worker and diver who raises his daughter outside of ‘legitimate’ society. In order to register himself as the girl’s father, he requires the signature of the mother who had disappeared many years earlier. Li makes several unfruitful visits to both the Kaohsiung and Taipei registration and council offices to plead his case. Faced with the prospect of his child being taken by social services, Li attempts a protest demonstration and climbs a bridge that spans a busy intersection. He threatens to jump off the bridge, taking the child with him, if the administrative blocks aren’t removed. He is arrested and jailed while the child is taken to be raised by social services. The film ends with a coda in which Li spends two years searching for the girl. The film ends at the point of their reuniting.

Despite the apparent melodramatic narrative, the film is highly political in its construction of alternative Taiwanese local identities. Li is a Hakka who lives on Cijin Island in the southern county of Kaohsiung. His existence within Taiwanese society is continually being tested and he exists on the periphery of approved ‘Taiwaneseness.’ As a part of the Hakka community on harbour edge of Kaohsiung he is situated on both the physical and cultural periphery of Taiwanese society; but this also causes linguistic liminality. He speaks both the Hakka and Hokklo languages used in his local neighbourhood, but his Mandarin Chinese is limited creating a further barrier to his ability to navigate the bureaucratic systems of official Taiwanese society, symbolized by his fruitless meetings in Taipei. He lives in an illegal squat and because of the nature of his seasonal and occasional work he is economically deprived, forced to live on the margins of fiscal security. This peripherality threatens to pass to the future generation through his daughter, who is unregistered and faces a similar future of linguistic, cultural and economic liminality. But the film becomes highly political in the construction of Taipei as officious, restrictive and unsympathetic to the needs and concerns of Taiwan’s diverse population of local peoples: Taipei is constructed as insensitive and ultimately failing in its adherence to ‘Policy’, policy which doesn’t recognize or fully appreciate the complexity of contemporary Taiwanese with multiple competing cultural, linguistic or political identifications.

The film opens by establishing several binary oppositions that are fundamental to the unfolding of narrative events. The film begins with an off-screen voice, speaking in officious Mandarin providing a television breaking-news broadcast. The announcer states that in Taipei a man is holding a child hostage on a bridge. The image track, however, shows a diverse crowd of workers in the southern city of Kaohsiung, smoking and watching the news broadcast on a small television. They begin commenting on the Mandarin news broadcast. In contrast to the audio track, the men are speaking in Hokklo and making bets on whether or not the man will jump. The film then cuts to the bridge in Taipei as he prepares to jump, as reporters and spectators mill about watching the terrified man shouting ‘this is an unfair society’. While the scene is unfolding, the sound fades to temple drums beating and the film then cuts to black and a title card stating ‘Kaohsiung, two weeks earlier.’ The film fades into a scene in Kaohsiung where Li and another man performing a trance dance as part of a ritual ceremony to bless a new boat. The two men self-flagellate while dancing in a trance mode as fireworks explode against their bare skin. Through their dance, they channel the spirits of gods who have come to bless the boat. The opening immediately sets a number of oppositions: Taipei is shown as a middle class media capital, while Kaohsiung comprises powerless working class observers; the Mandarin news broadcast is contrasted with the Hokklo news receivers; and there is also a contrast in the two scenes between diverse forms of knowledge – there is the television broadcast as a knowledge dissemination system, contrasted with the local knowledge inherent in the spectacle of the religious ceremony.

The performed trance dance is a significant moment in the film. While Li is powerless to navigate the official channels of registration and law in Taipei – his pleas to council offices and social workers fail to be heard, and he has difficulty understanding their official mandarin, further obstructing his progress – the boat blessing ritual sequence demonstrates Li’s powerful *local* knowledge. As part of a fishing community, the deadly threats of the ocean and of the Goddess Matsu are held

in high esteem. Li's ability, through dance and knowledge of local custom, allows him to channel the gods and appropriately bless the ship ensuring for the fishing community, safety and prosperity. His is a local knowledge of religion and custom, but one that is alien to the Sinicized administrators of 'legitimate' knowledge in bureaucratic Taiwan. Indeed, they don't 'speak the same language,' literally or metaphorically: His is a world of ritualized custom, cultural practice and magic whereas theirs is a world of bureaucracy and law, and these two Taiwanese existences – urban versus local – are here proven fundamentally incompatible.

These cultural divides becomes crystallized in the figure of the daughter, who though raised by the father does not understand the Hakka language. Li acknowledges to a former classmate Lin, a Hakka who is now a government Legislator, that he stopped using that language as it no longer has any function in his daily life. Further, when he speaks to his daughter, she responds to his Hokklo speech with Mandarin Chinese. Her ability to speak Mandarin is contrasted with the father, who has a child's command of Mandarin – he has no difficulty understanding the daughter's responses – who is often bewildered when encountering the bureaucratic language of the social workers and councillors' obfuscating discourse. As part of a generation that is schooled in Mandarin, the bilingual daughter intuits that the Mandarin language of society has more purchase than the Hokklo language of her domestic space, a language that becomes a private but near obsolete discourse between her and her father. The film suggests that like Hakka has become for Li a defunct language, Hokklo too is threatened, reduced to a language of the market place but with little currency in the increasingly industrialized world of Modern Taiwan and it too is becoming a defunct language for the future generation. Significantly, when the daughter is seized by the social workers, she stops talking and becomes a mute. This becomes symbolic resistance, as the daughter understands that Mandarin is the language of the bureaucratic system that had oppressed her father and broken her family, and by refusing to speak she refuses to participate in the culture of the bourgeois oppressor. Her muteness becomes a form of political resistance against the forces that are deaf to the needs of Taiwan's culturally diverse population. By telling stories of minority oppression, the film becomes a part of the Taiwanese localism movement. It is through highlighting Taipei's deafness to the needs of Taiwan's non-Mandarin speaking communities (symbolically through the complacent system of bureaucracy) that the film resists Sinocentric policies. The film poses a case for reconsidering Taiwan as envisioned by proponents of the One China policy, a policy which inappropriately denies that such pluralism in Taiwan exists. The film suggests that such a one China Sinocentric ideology denies the Taiwanese cultural specificity that the sovereignty movement campaigns for.

Is Taiwanese Cinema a National Cinema when there is no Nation?

Several writers have characterized Taiwanese cinema as a National cinema. Douglass Kellner (1998), writing about the product of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang and Ang Lee, describes *New Taiwan Cinema* as 'a Cycle of national cinema,' arguing that the films rebel against genre cinema and attempt to 'explore the realities and problems of contemporary Taiwanese society (101). Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, in their work *The Cinema of Small Nations*, include a chapter on Taiwan, although they preface their definition, stating:

In this case, one has to qualify the terms ‘nation’ or ‘national’ with quotation marks. Taiwan may function, act and in many ways even thrive like a small ‘nation’ should, but most countries in the world do not recognize the island as an independent nation out of geopolitical obsequiousness towards its neighbouring behemoth, the People’s Republic of China (PRC). (2007, p. 144)

They argue that the films of Taiwan do reflect a national character and are concerned with local identity and identity politics in a way that is akin to a national cinema, but are not particularly comfortable in their definition and are reluctant to emphasize Taiwanese ‘nationness’ because of its contested political status. Zhang Yinjing uses Crofts’ typology of national cinemas in an attempt to highlight the difficulty of categorizing Chinese language cinema.

Chinese cinema, like Australian cinema, ‘is a messy affair,’ not the least because Chinese cinema is ‘fundamentally dispersed’ – historically, politically, territorially, culturally, ethnically and linguistically. The messy state of Chinese cinema means that the question of the ‘national’ will not go away if we substitute ‘national cinema’ with ‘nation-state cinema’. Indeed the association with the nation-state is precisely what makes the term ‘Chinese cinema’ problematic. (p. 2)

Zhang’s work subsumes Taiwanese cinema into a greater Chinese cultural practice, and diminishes and denies Taiwanese cultural and political autonomy, but his argument is sound in that Taiwan is a defacto, but contested, national identity but its cinema does not conform to the various codified definitions or characterizations of national cinema as do other conventional National cinemas. For Zhang, it is precisely because Taiwan, and for that matter China too have contested political boundaries that change and undermine their ‘nation-ness. Jason Ho Ka-Hang (2012) goes further, problematizing ‘Asianness’ too as a contested, poorly defined categorization.

It is not easy to define Asianness, not to mention the term itself is subject to ongoing refinement and redefinition. Alongside changes, globalization, and Asianness, the nation and nationalism are two very much related terms that are subject to constant re-examination. (p. 2)

Again, for Ho it is precisely because of the various re-negotiations of what constitutes a national identity and even what constitutes Asianness itself, that analysis of Taiwanese cinema as belonging to specific cultural or political movements or identifications becomes problematic. He continues, stating “The newness inscribed in contemporary East Asian films precisely overrides and goes beyond the national cinema model, and trespasses or even transgresses the national and postcolonial discourse” (Ho, 2004, p. 2). Ho bypasses the problematic nature of “the National,” arguing contemporary Taiwanese cinema to be a *Post-National* cinema, a cinema which looks beyond questions of the national to examine indigenous and minority concerns, issues that he argues are evident in *Cape No. 7*. “I assert that what is emerging is something less nationalistic/political and more humanistic/personalized in the form of belonging to a community” (2004, p. 2). In Ho’s conception, the post-national text “dialogues with nationalism and reacts critically to globalization” and such responses “forge alternative approaches” and evoke “a different kind of individuality” (2004, p. 2). Ho argues that the local identity *is* the post-national self, and that ‘if the national is beginning to fall apart, the local is able to recapture its

importance and gain substantial space in the search of a communal identity – Taiwanese-ness in our case” (Ho, 2004, p.p. 2-3).

Ho is very astute in his reading of *Cape No. 7*, and in the global context of Post-nationalism, such sentiments are certainly felt within contemporary Taiwanese cinema: but Ho is too quick to conceive Taiwanese cinema as looking for the breakup of the nation. Rather, Taiwanese cinema should be considered a *proto-nationalist* cinema, which, borrowing the ideologies of localism inherent in post-nationalism, is part of a cultural sovereignty movement. In short, the contemporary cinema movement seems to view localism *as Taiwanese*. While it is looking to detach from the greater Pan Chinese nation and calling for the breakup of the ROC: it is hoping to re-constitute itself as a sovereign national identity (Taiwan). It is precisely a form of pre-nationalist cinema, in that it is calling for a redefinition of the Taiwanese nation, detached from pan-Chinese cultural chauvinism and fixated on questions of local identity as part of a reconstituted Taiwanese-ness that is separate and distinct from the ROC’s conception of the one China two systems policy. It is a cinema that is part of a greater movement which, as Daniel Lynch argues, is attempting to imagine for itself a new national identity – new Taiwanese-ness. While Ho’s argument and reasoning are correct – that is, Taiwanese cinema is certainly informed by the discourse of Post-nationalism, and contemporary Taiwanese cinema is contesting ‘Taiwanese-ness’ – it cannot be seen as a post-national cinema (a cinema that moves beyond nationness), because a newly envisioned nationhood, nationhood that encompasses non-sinocentric history and culture, still remains the end goal. This contemporary Taiwanese cinema of localism is not hoping to maintain the status quo, that is, to ignore the question of sovereignty, but rather is derived from the post Chen Shui-bian nationalist era and is increasingly attempting to envision and articulate the Taiwanese nation as opposed to that of The Republic of China.

Proto-Nationalism in a Taiwanese Cinema of Localism

The night market has become a common trope in a number of contemporary popular Taiwanese films. The night market is an important site in contemporary Taiwanese culture, as it is a familiar space to contemporary Taiwanese, but also becomes a filmic shorthand for cultural blending. It is in the night market that Hokklo, Mandarin, Hakka and Aboriginal cultures meet and mingle, and it is particularly among the food-stalls that night markets express Taiwanese cultural pluralism, with aboriginal, Hakka, Taiwanese and Chinese foodstuffs being offered in equal measure. The film *Monga*, set in the summer of 1987, unfolds in the old Temple/market quarter of Monga, Taipei. While the film occurs within the city of Taipei, the setting of a 1980s working class quarter becomes a nostalgic local space, inhabited by a diverse mix of marginalized peoples, who discover security in gang life. The period setting of 1987 is significant, as it marks a symbolic moment of change from the martial law era and the dynastic rule of Chiang Ching-kuo, to Taiwanese fledgling democracy. The period marks a moment imbued with the potential to detach from old guard Chinese cultural superiority as exemplified by imposed rule under KMT dictatorship, to democratic local politics. However, the film provides a new external threat: The Taiwanese gangs of the Monga district are threatened by a new gang of wealthy and organized Chinese mainlanders with links to the Triad drug trade, symbolically substituting political Chinese hegemony as embodied by Chiang Ching-Kuo with economic Chinese hegemony, embodied by Shanghainese drug money.

The film begins with a depiction of the Monga district as a rough and tumble neighbourhood of diverse people from different ethnicities, though predominantly Hokklo speakers, who have minor squabbles and fights between competing gangs that have subdivided the Monga district into separate territories. The film starts with a new boy, the *weishengren* (mandarin speaking) Wenze, being invited into the Monga temple gang after he successfully fights off a group of bullies. The gang are themselves a group of *benshengren* (local Taiwanese) misfits: Monk, the son of a Buddhist devotee; Dragon, the mixed race son of the leader of the Temple gang; A-Po the son of a local butcher; and monkey, the son of a grocer. The film begins with a bucolic evocation of the past and a presentation of the streets of Monga as a cozy warren of temples, restaurants and shops, where the local community come together to live and to settle their differences. While the society is steeped in a culture of violence and perpetual fistfights, such ructions are seen as a means of solidifying brotherhood and testing and confirming loyalties among the community. The gangs have learned there are rules to maintaining an uneasy peace between the different factions and there is harmony in this violence. The uneasy status quo is challenged with the coming of a new gang of *weishengren* led by the Mandarin speaking Grey Wolf who has close links to the mainland drugs industry and introduces guns into the neighbourhood.

The film reaches a crisis with the Chinese gangsters, hoping to consolidate power throughout the Monga district, make the myriad local gangs subordinate to their ambitions. Grey Wolf plants seeds of sedition among the different gangs and the film ends with all out war and bloodshed. Even the members of the Temple gang aren't immune to Grey Wolf's manipulations and they too fight amongst themselves. While rough and with ructions the Monga district had been stable when left to its own devices and had found a solution that allowed for the pluralistic local society to maintain stability. However, it is with the introduction of the Chinese gangsters who seek domination with the importation of their ideologies of divide and rule that causes the film to inevitably end in tragedy. The message could not be clearer: Taiwan was better left to self rule and to sort out its own problems (as rough as that may have been) than with the intervention and imposition of Chinese rule that has no consideration for local needs and promotes dissention and bloodshed among the population. The film becomes a symbolic echo of the entrance of postwar Kuomintang rule and the 2/28 incident, but it can also be seen as allegorical for contemporary Taiwan which too is in an uneasy moment of status quo, with regular within the population and with the looming threat of Chinese intervention. The film seems to ask, what new bloodshed would reunification bring?

A final example of indigeneity in the contemporary Taiwanese cinema of localism is from the 2011 film *Night Market Hero*. This film too is set in a night market, which again is constructed as a bucolic site of cultural blending. Predominantly composed of *benshengren*, harmony is at first threatened with the introduction into their community of a young female *weishengren* middle class reporter who is immediately coded as an outsider and unwanted interloper into the *benshengren* cultural space. After a disastrous accident, she is forced to work in the night market as a form of community service, where she learns that she too can become a vital part of this pluralistic society and that she is in fact a welcome and productive member of the community, echoing Shih Cheng-feng's statement that "the Taiwanese Nation refers to all people who love Taiwan, identify with Taiwan, and are willing to struggle for

Taiwan, regardless of race, ethnicity, or provincial background” (Shih in Lynch, 2004, p. 526). The night market is seen as a site where the diversity of the Taiwanese population can all come and participate in Taiwanese culture, *weishengren* and *benshengren* alike. In the night market, there are two local cooks, *Madam Fried Chicken* and *Madam Beef Steak* who are in constant battle for epicurean supremacy, peppering their language with Chinese, Taiwanese and Japanese idioms. Both are represented by a popular Taiwanese street snack and both consider their food to be representative of the best of Taiwan. There is a brief sequence that relates to contemporary China-Taiwan relations. A tour group of Chinese nationals visits the night market (Taiwan had only recently approved visas for Chinese tourism) to experience an authentic Taiwanese environment. The workers of the night market fawn all over the Chinese guests, falling over themselves and trying to impress and please the Chinese visitors, hoping for the Chinese to try the cuisine which they all consider to be the best that Taiwan has to offer and to empty the deep pockets of the Chinese tourists. *Madam Beef Steak* and *Madam Fried Chicken* in particular insist the Chinese customers try their product. The Chinese state ‘You Taiwanese are so honest in your business practice’ (a statement that the night market workers are happy to agree with, although they are aware they can at times stretch the limits of that ‘honesty’). The Chinese customers are encouraged to try the peppered steak first, and they marvel approvingly over its deliciousness, stating ‘it’s unlike anything that can be found in China.’ They are then encouraged to try *Madam Chicken’s* fried Chicken which they duly taste, at which point the Chinese diners fall into a dreamy state while the sound track plays a nationalist song with the lyrics ‘Taiwan’s great, Taiwan’s truly great! Taiwan’s such a great island, blessed with the warm ocean breeze and the great ocean wave and the beauty of A-li Mountain.’”

The night market workers then load the Chinese up with armfuls of Taiwanese products to take with them on their return to the mainland. In this sequence, China becomes an invited guest that discovers the beauty and quality of Taiwanese cultural product and cultural distinctiveness (‘There is nothing like this in China’), where even the Chinese visitors consider Taiwan a foreign nation. The film looks to a future in which China and Taiwan can interact with each other as two nations do, with the Chinese guests enjoying what Taiwan has to offer, but ultimately afterwards, going home. The Chinese guests are coded as foreign, unlike the Taiwanese locals, who are coded as pluralistic and diverse but united by their deep love of Taiwan in its totality. The film becomes part of a movement of Taiwan centric cultural identity politics, promoting and developing Taiwanese pluralism as a cogent and unified political entity once again encompassed by the umbrella of loving Taiwan.

Contemporary Taiwan is still in a period of status quo, being neither an autonomous political entity, nor a part of greater China. That liminal position must come to an end. Increasingly, Taiwanese cinema seems to be looking to put the *Republic of China* as a political entity, to the past, and focus on *Taiwan*-centric political and cultural identities. This new populist cinematic movement, borrowing the politics of *post nationalism* and its focus on localism, is in fact a *proto-nationalist* cinema, imagining for Taiwan a coherent independent cultural identity founded on the Democratic Progressive Party’s emphasis on pluralism and localism, and in opposition to the previous Kuomintang era of enforced Sinicization, an ethos which continues to haunt the KMT to this day.

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