Pearl Lost in the Sea:  
Wan Jen, An Overlooked Director of the  
Taiwan New Cinema

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Marking the dawn of a new era in Taiwan cinema, *The Taste of Apple*, the third installment of *The Sandwich Man* (1983), affirms Wan Jen's inclusion in the New Taiwan Cinema filmic movement. The film attests to significant differences between Wan Jen and his Taiwan contemporaries in addition to mapping out Wan Jen’s filmic concerns in his works from the 80s to the 90s. In this film Wan Jen brings Hou’s nostalgic villagers from the country to the city, and shows a working class view of the city tellingly different from Edward Yang’s bourgeois Taipei.

“City vs. country conflict” is one of the dominant themes in Taiwan New Cinema. In the 70s, Taiwan’s economy took-off and earned the glorious label of the “Taiwan Miracle.” During these gilded years, Taiwan society underwent rapid industrialization, modernization, and urbanization. To make more money and earn a better life, lots of villagers “went north” in Taiwan, flocking to Taipei city with dreams of gold-digging. At the same time, the rural south’s traditional communities encountered the threat of urbanization and began to fall apart. Hou Hsiao-hsien’s autobiographical works in the 80s, especially *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1985) and *Dust in the Wind* (1986), express his nostalgia toward the (lost and imagined) “pre-modern Taiwan” in poetic forms. In stark contrast, Edward Yang’s modernist works, including

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That Day on the Beach (1983), Taipei Story (1985), and The Terrorizers (1986), exhibit his insightful anatomy on the life and psychology of middle-class citizens, and present a cool critique of urbanization and its alienation. Together, Hou and Edward Yang set the main agenda for Taiwan New Cinema: the clash between city and country.

Ah-Fa, a road construction laborer, gets run down by a Cadillac on the street of Taipei one morning. It’s a thorny situation since the driver is Colonel Gray, an American. In order not to spoil the political relationship between the United States and Taiwan, the officials on both sides must find a way to deal with the accident. Colonel Gray and a Taiwan policeman travel to an urban slum to locate Ah-Fa’s family, in order to bring them to the Naval Hospital to see Ah-Fa, who has lost one of his legs. Colonel Gary promises to take full responsibility and to compensate accordingly: he will pay all medical fees and in addition cover the family’s loss of future income. For Ah-Fa’s family, the whole incident seems to turn from a miserable tragedy to a rather fortunate fairy-tale, for ironically the family gains more than what they lose in the accident. For them, it’s just like the taste of American apples in the ending scene: it’s difficult to tell whether it’s sweet or sour.

As a member of Taiwan New Cinema, Wan Jen shares similar concerns with Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, in particular the focus on modernization and the dominant motif of “city vs. country conflict.” However, Wan Jen’s films show his unique dialectic perspective in these concerns. The Taste of Apple establishes its main concern for the issue of urbanization from the very beginning. In the opening sequence of The Taste of Apple, Wan Jen uses montage to provide a distinctive series of still shots of Taipei’s cityscape, showing not only the morning of a metropolis and the dawn of urbanization, but also foreshadowing his premonitory mourning for the
looming “consequence of modernity.” Opening *The Taste of Apple* with a time-space complex framed in one morning in modern Taipei, Wan Jen establishes the social and historical context of the story: the beginning of modernization in 1970s Taiwan. At the same time, in Wan Jen’s unique lighting and coloring, “morning light” can be mistaken as “evening twilight,” as it is imbued with a sad tone of melancholy. Wan Jen quickly cuts to the next shot which shows a construction worksite: a laborer is working with a drill beside a road roller. On the soundtrack, there are shrills, presented as “Expressionist sound,” literally “splitting” the precedent opening sequence that portrays a tranquil morning in Taipei. Such a composition of sight and sound implies that this city is “under construction,” and it will always and forever be under construction, as it pertains to the condition of modernity. The shocking jump-cut is both a social and cultural symbol for it shows the brutal intrusion and rupture of urbanization, indicating there is imminent violence always inside the city itself. It’s not surprising that, in the ensuing sequence, Wan Jen stages a bloody car crash, which accentuates the danger of urban life. The opening sequence of *The Taste of Apple* thus foregrounds the themes of Taiwan’s urbanization and its discontent.

Another significant scene in *The Taste of Apple*, Ah-Fa’s wife recalling a train-trip leaving the rural south for the urban north, reveals Wan Jen’s unique perspective in his representation of Taipei from the viewpoint of the working class. In the middle of the story, Ah-Fa’s family rushes to the hospital in Colonel Gray’s Cadillac. During the drive to the hospital, Wan Jen cuts to a flashback scene from Mrs. Fa’s POV, shifting the space on the screen from the interior of the automobile to a bench in a train compartment and the time from

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1 The overview shot of the Taipei cityscape in melancholy evening lighting recurs in Wan Jen’s films, forming a distinctive signature.
the present to the past, thus making use of “stream of consciousness”\textsuperscript{2} as a narrative device. Mrs. Fa recollects the day when she and her husband Ah-Fa, a rural couple coming from southern Taiwan, took a northbound train to Taipei. Worried and hesitant, she kept silent and listened quietly to Ah-Fa’s optimistic and zealous proclamations about the promising life in Taipei. This flashback scene shows that Ah-Fa equates the northern metropolis with the hope of a better life, though the traffic accident will turn that dream into a nightmare. To the working class, the city as the embodiment of urbanization and modernization poses far more negative constraints and threats than positive opportunities and promises, more darkness than light. More significantly, Wan Jen’s camera zooms-in and then fixes on a close-up of Ah-Fa’s blood shed in the opening accident scene to show that, to the working class the city brings more harm than gain. Swiftly, this shot of blood dissolves into another cityscape, a panoramic view of the urban ghetto the Ah-Fa family inhabits. By juxtaposing the scenery of the urban ghetto with the bloody site of car accident,\textsuperscript{3} Wan Jen maps out the violence of urbanization. The formation of the urban ghetto as a constitutive and inevitable by-product of urbanization exposes the spatial logic of a capitalistic metropolis. Urbanization summons, mobilizes, and assembles villagers for the construction of the metropolis, yet the exploited and impoverished laborers, alienated from the skyscrapers and disposed of in the ghetto, rarely share its fruits. The monumental modernist buildings and the ghetto surrounded by skyscrapers form a picture of shocking contrast, vividly and fully inscribing the working class into the image of the

\textsuperscript{2} The modernist technique of “stream of consciousness” also appears in another short in this trio film, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s \textit{The Sandwich Man}. It shows that, in the 80s, New Cinema directors were willing to experiment with a variety of film languages.

\textsuperscript{3} This urban ghetto is named “Kan-Le District” (康樂里), which appears also in Wan Jen’s following works: \textit{Ah-Fei}, \textit{Super Citizen}, and \textit{Super Citizen Ko}. The significance of this urban ghetto will be further developed in Chapter Two.
city as urban victims.

In the context of 80s Taiwan New Cinema, Wan Jen’s focus on the working class in a metropolis and the bottom-up view of the city marks his uniqueness among the directors, especially in contrast to the forerunners of the movement, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. In his article on Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jerome Li has observed that, city-images fade in Hou’s works in the 80s. Li unfolds the process through which Hou sharply contrasts city to country, and then replaces city-images, which dominate his early commercial films like *Cute Girls* (1981) and *Play While You Play* (1981), with country-images. Li even points out that Hou’s *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* “systematically avoids or averts modernized and urbanized images, taking full effort to construct a ‘pre-modern’ Taiwan image”(133). In contrast, Wan Jen’s works in the 80s are set exclusively in Taipei, staging stories of “villagers in a modern city.”

Unlike Edward Yang, the acclaimed master of “city films,” who presents Taipei as a city of the urban bourgeoisie by focusing on the issues of alienation, traumatic experience, and spiritual emptiness of urban bourgeoisie, Wan Jen pays more attention to the working class laborers and social nobodies, who fight for their survival in the harsh world of the metropolis. In his direct dealing of the city vs. country conflict, Wan Jen’s realistic approach allows the audience to “experience” the life of the working class. If one of the main goals of Taiwan New Cinema is to follow the Xiang-tu literary movement in re-writing Taiwan history from grass-roots, the total neglect of Wan Jen in the study of Taiwan cinema means a significant

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blind spot in our understanding of Taiwan New Cinema.

Another significant aspect of Wan Jen’s films is his insightful attention to “mother-daughter relationships.” From *The Taste of Apple* on, he adopts the “mother-daughter” motif to portray Taipei as a distinctively “gendered city,” especially in *Ah-Fei* (1984) and *The Story of Taipei Women* (1991). Since the 1960s, Taiwan has undergone rapid modernization and westernization, drastically changing the roles of women in Taiwan society. For the first time in Taiwan history, women collectively entered the public field and took on professional careers. Male directors of Taiwan New Cinema adopt very different approaches in their films in response to the rise of these “New Women.” First of all, Chang Yi’s *Kuei-Mei, A Woman* (我這樣過了一生, 1985) returns to the traditional “mother figure,” who for her whole life endures the exploitation of patriarchal modernization, and nourishes the economic development of Taiwan in terms of her female labor and maternal toil. Moreover, female protagonists in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s nostalgic works are often set in the rural countryside. They are usually idealized and purified, signifying both the lost virtue and the memory of the past golden age. Secondly, new women are represented as more adaptive to social change than men, and they are mysterious to men and beyond their control, thus posing a threat to male characters. Edward Yang’s portrayal of career women in *That Day on the Beach* and *Taipei Story* is remarkable: the new women in these female initiation stories not only survive the destruction of modernization, but also take the lead in the end. In *The Terrorizers*, heroines are mysterious and beyond control, slipping away from the patriarchal system.\(^5\) In other films

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\(^5\) In the film, the teenage girl is beyond the shot and frame of the male photographer. In other words, she’s not representable. On the other hand, the female novelist in the film controls the power of representation.
“raging women” fight back against and even shatter the patriarchal system. One example is Chang Yi’s *Madam Yu-Ching, Jade Love* (玉卿嫂, 1985) in which the sexually-driven woman literally “bites” her lover. In Tseng Chuang Hsiang (曾壯祥)’s *The Woman of Wrath* (殺夫, 1985), the exploited and beaten wife eventually kills her husband.\(^6\)

While most other films in the Taiwan New Cinema movement ignore gender issues and choose to deal with the theme of father-son conflict to reflect the waning power of the KMT in the 80s, Wan Jen sees the image of the new woman and mother-daughter relationships as significant undercurrents in Taiwan’s urban society, and begins to address the gender issues. For instance, the father figure in Hou’s works is always absent, paralyzed or half-dead.\(^7\) Likewise Edward Yang’s portraits of “frustrated men” are conspicuous and significant: an absent husband, a dead brother, and a fallen father in *That Day on the Beach* and a deceased hero in *Taipei Story*. In *The Terrorizers* the fatigued male protagonist even commits suicide. The gender politics in these films, embodied either by an “absent father” or a “frustrated man” under the monolith of modernization and urbanization, implicitly echoes the fact that the KMT patriarchy was then encountering a challenge in the form of the up and coming social and political movement of democracy. In *The Taste of Apple*, however, female characters are more vivid, subtle and complex than their male counterparts, not only bearing the pressures and inscriptions of modernization, but also reacting to urbanization with unique cognitive mapping and spatial

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\(^6\) Robert Chen offers his categorization of four female figures in Taiwan New Cinema. See his *Historical and Cultural Experience in Taiwan New Cinema*, p127-33.

tactics.  

In *The Taste of Apple*, Wan Jen presents a working class ghetto family in Taipei, composed of a crippled father, a pair of naive sons, a weepy mother, and two daughters: one intended “to-be-sold” and the second, a mute. Ah-Fa gets run over and collapses in a pool of blood at the very beginning of this film, unseen until the ending scene, lying disabled in a hospital bed. Throughout the film, his two sons are ignorant to the seriousness of the car accident. They run around and even play games in the hospital. Both Ah-Fa and the two boys are unable to deal with the whole incident and its reference to urbanization. In contrast, though Mrs. Fa and her daughters are also subsequent victims, they handle it and actively respond to it. Mrs. Fa’s splendid crying empathizes with the despair of the victim, but it also serves as her conscious strategy to earn as much sympathy and compensation as possible from Colonel Gray. Additionally, Mrs. Fa’s subjective flashback sequence reveals, in comparison to her husband, her significantly more comprehensive and critical view of the promises of city-life, and serves as her implicit criticism that foreshadows the approaching tragedy. Ah-Fa’s first daughter, doomed to be “sold” to support her brothers’ schooling, is also well aware of her fate, and understands that behind it is the gendered economy of women as commodity. The most interesting female character is the mute daughter, who might be seen as a symbol both of the “silenced” working class and of a “de-voiced” woman.  


9 On the north-bound train, Ah-Fa tells his wife, “Doctors in Taipei are able to teach our dumb daughter to learn how to talk.” Near the end of the short, Colonel Gray would like to adopt the dumb girl and take her to United States. He adds and promises, “American doctors can make the girl talk.” It seems that: Taipei is more modern than Southern Taiwan, the United
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The ghetto scene, she comes across Colonel Gray and the local policeman, lost and looking for her father. The local policeman consults her for the official address, but she is unable to understand the question. However, when asked “Where is Ah-Fa’s house,” she waves and gesticulates excitedly in response. It seems that though she cannot “tell” them the direction and the exact route, her experience rendered familiarity with the ghetto endows her with a “cognitive map” of the urban labyrinth. In other words, she owns an alternative map totally different from the government’s (official and patriarchal) knowledge of this ghetto district.

Wan Jen’s interest in the gender issues is most obviously reflected in the mother and daughter relationship in his second film Ah-Fei (1984) and the much ignored The Story of Taipei Women (1991). In these two films, Wan Jen shows a unique view of “women and metropolis” different from his contemporary directors. In Ah-Fei, though women are victims of patriarchal modernization and urbanization, the tension between the traditional and the modern is addressed in the narrative of “negotiating with mother.” Wan Jen shows the possibility that the generation gap, rapidly widened by modernization, might be bridged and the violent consequence of urbanization could be moderated by a female vision: despite conflicts, female conciliation is at last reached by the consolidated fate of women, especially of mothers and daughters, within the folds of patriarchal urbanization and modernization. Moreover, in The Story of Taipei Women Wan Jen not only complicates the tension between (traditional) mother and (modern) daughter with a story of three modern women, but touches the issue of the “three modernities” of Taiwan. The binary opposition of the traditional vs. the modern, always

States is more modern than Taipei; and hence, the more modern, the more miraculous.

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represented as the clash and rupture of fathers and sons, should be reconsidered subtly through the lens of “multiple modernities” embodied in the three women in *The Story of Taipei Women*.

In the 90s, while most directors represent Taipei as a “post-modern metropolis” through stories of young adults, Wan Jen portrays it as a “post-colonial city” through the memory of “old souls,” bringing back forgotten or erased political histories to the city. Taiwan New Cinema as a movement reached its end in 1987, when, as critics claim, it had lost its legitimacy and position in the cultural avant-garde of the 80s. It is ironic that after martial law was lifted, fewer and fewer directors turned away from the political polemics, especially the controversial issue of rewriting Taiwan history. For example, in the 90s Wan Jen featured more daring political ideology with his city films, addressing the long tabooed White Terror in *Citizen Ko* (1994) and in *Connection by Fate* (1998) probing the untouched issue of the corruption of democratic movement led by DPP.

On the other hand, in order to foreground the political histories, Wan Jen adopts a different approach in representing Taipei in the 90s. While other directors employ young people or teenagers as their main characters, Wan Jen’s protagonists are middle-aged taxi drivers and old men. Both Lin Wen-chi

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10 ‘Old Souls’ (老靈魂) is a term often adopted by many literary critics to describe the protagonists in Taiwanese fictionist Ju Tien-hsin’s (朱天心) works. Such characters are frequently wandering Taipei, tracing its forgotten history, mourning what is lost, and feeling alienated by the modern city. In fact, it’s said that one inspiration of Wan Jen’s *Super Citizen Ko* is one of Ju Tien-hsin’s fictions: *Once Upon a Time...There’s an Urashima Taro* (從前從前有個浦島太郎), a poignant political story.


12 In the 90s, in order to come to the rescue of the collapsing and dying market of Taiwan Cinema, there was an urgent and strong calling to make films for younger audiences and win back the teenagers, who had been absorbed in popular Hong Kong and Hollywood movies.
and Wang Wei point out, Taipei in the films of the 90s often appears as a fragmented, collaged, flattened, and depthless post-modern city, a space without a past.\textsuperscript{13} Taipei in the 90s has entered the post-industrial and late-capitalist stages. The subjective POV adopted by these films, the eyes of adolescent people or the so-called “generation of New Human” (新新人類), presents Taipei as a post-modern metropolis. Quite conversely, Wan Jen’s old protagonists are burdened with dense histories, as if haunted by past ghosts, for the films to reveal the historical layers underneath the bright and flat cityscapes. They show that Taipei in the 90s is not a city without history but a “city as palimpsest,”\textsuperscript{14} inscribed with layers of writing, rewriting, and traces of dense histories. Taking this approach, Wan Jen no longer presents Taipei as a postmodern city but a postcolonial metropolis. As a result, difficult and thorny issues involved with history, memory, and political regimes are brought back to the cinematic city space in the 90s.

When \textit{The Sandwich Man} was sent to the Taiwan Film Bureau, in charge of censorship, several scenes in Wan Jen’s \textit{The Taste of Apple} were cut. For KMT officials, the scenes involving the illegal shabby ghetto, the tragic car accident caused by the American Colonel, and the embarrassing vulgarity of Ah-Fa’s family would potentially stigmatize the image of Taipei and spoil the political friendship between Taiwan and the US. What’s more interesting and significant in this incident is, among three shorts, only Wan Jen’s \textit{The Taste of

Thus, Wan Jen’s characters and casting are actually against the grain. However, it in turn helps Wan Jen form a distinctive perspective on Taipei.


Apple aroused such a strong response from the KMT government, which provoked hot debates and fierce protests from its supporters, who called it “The Incident of Apple Peeled (削蘋果事件).” The incident not only testifies to the politically-charged potential in Wan Jen’s debut work, but also prefigures his political concerns in later works. Wan Jen’s short film clearly offended and challenged the taboos to which the officials were highly sensitive. In retrospect, Wan Jen’s interest in political issues and his ability to focus upon the most ignored or suppressed topics surfaces early in his career.

Wan Jen’s view of Taipei city as a palimpsest layered with political histories is already metaphorically obvious in the ghetto scene of The Taste of Apple. When Colonel Gray and the local policeman enter the ghetto to find Ah-Fa’s house, the scene demonstrates its complex and dense textuality both visually and auditorily. The labyrinthian ghetto is composed of a collection of building materials from diverse sources. The inhabitants piece together and pile up their temporary “homes” with bricks, tin, metal sheets, and wood, forming a layer-clustered and montage-like construction without any order, offensive to official urban-planning. No wonder the confused and lost Colonel Gray grumbles, “It’s like a labyrinth for kids to play hide-and-seek.”

More significantly, if we listen attentively, on the soundtrack we can hear various sounds of different ethnicities. The radios and gramophones outside the frame together give off the mixed and mumbled sounds of Peking opera (平劇), Taiwanese or Fukien dialect radio programs (台語賣藥電台), Mandarin popular songs (國語流行歌曲), and old Taiwanese popular songs with the melody of Japanese ‘Enka’ (日式演歌風味台語歌曲), accompanied by the barely audible sounds of a mothers’ cursing, crying children, and hens’ clucking.

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15 In the eyes of “The First World,” people in “The Third World” are always “infantilized.”
If the ghetto, as a unique product of urbanization, paradoxically and dialectically serves as a miniature of a modern metropolis, reflecting the nature and structure of Taipei city itself, then the motif of “urban palimpsest” that runs through Wan Jen’s films is already present in this scene. The mixture of sounds in this ghetto scene tells us that Taipei is composed of heterogeneous communities and historicities, marked by distinct music styles. These sounds show that Taiwan history is written and re-written by a dramatic series of political regimes and their subjects: Taiwanese migrants since Ching dynasty, fifty years of Japanese colonialism, and the influx of Chinese mainlanders since 1945. Furthermore, the use of different languages in this film could be seen as a precedent to the famous negotiation scene in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *City of Sadness* (1989). Throughout Wan Jen’s *The Taste of Apple*, the inter-weaving of languages, (lost in) translation, and linguistic misunderstanding among the local family’s Taiwanese, Colonel Gray’s English, the schoolteacher and policeman’s Mandarin, the American nun-nurse’s fluent Taiwanese, and the mute daughter’s sign language, together articulate the “polyglot” or “multiple-languages” of Taiwan society and history. Wan Jen’s portrayal of Taipei as palimpsest will later become more mature and condensed in his two politico-historical films in the 90s, *Citizen Ko* and *Connection by Fate*.

Though the movement of Taiwan New Cinema is claimed to have ended in 1987, the year when Wan Jen made *Farewell to the Channel* (1987), the legacy of this movement not only survives in its members’ later works but has

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16 Mandarin is imposed and institutionalized by KMT as the official and national language. Knowing no English, Mrs. Fa and her daughter enter the toilet for gentlemen. Later, an American soldier rushes in and is consequently embarrassed. He apologizes: “I’m sorry.” But for Mrs. Fa the pronunciation of “I’m sorry” sounds like “Why didn’t you lock the door?” in Taiwanese.
influenced following generations as well. According to Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, Taiwan New Cinema can’t be defined by or concluded with Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang’s auteur works. To many people’s surprise, there’s a “lost half” of this movement left unnoticed and ignored till now. In opposition to Hou and Edward Yang’s artistic achievement, movies by Wong Tong (王童) and Yu Kang-Ping (虞戡平) earned commercial success and popularity in the 80s. Yeh and Davis take the lost counterpart into consideration and wish to re-chart Taiwan New Cinema: Hou and Edward Yang’s auteur films set against Wong and Yu’s popular movies in the 80s.17 Wan Jen’s position is ambiguous in this re-mapping. On the one hand, Wang Jen learned filmmaking in California and makes use of Hollywood elements in his films, such as the road movie, the family melodrama, and the black comedy. On the other hand, Wan Jen has long been considered an “auteur” owing to the intensity and richness of the social critique in his works, which does not cater to and entertain the general audience.18

Though Taiwan New Cinema is known for its artistic achievement, Wan Jen’s works possess a unique quality of “in-between,” lingering between auteur films and popular movies. In Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis’s re-charted map of Taiwan New Cinema, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward

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18 Actually, after completing Ah-Fei, Wan Jen himself had in one short article “From Pen to Camera” confessed his attitude and approach to filmmaking: “I believe one director could present his personal style through different genres and materials” (62). Noteworthy, while the title of this essay reveals a trace of auteur theory, Wan Jen in this article emphasizes how “story, dramatic conflict, and charm of popularity” in Ah-Fei could be achieved (63). Apparently, since the very early years of his filmmaking career, Wan Jen has already shown an attempt to balance “artistic” and “popular.”
Yang on the one hand, Wong Tong and Yu Kang-ping on the other, Wan Jen’s position is problematic. As a serious and fervent social critic, Wan Jen’s employment of Hollywood genre elements, taken from black comedy, family melodrama and road movies, distinguishes him from his comrades of a similar critical position on the issue of modernization and urbanization. Moreover, Wan Jen’s filmic style underwent a radical shift in the 90s. In *Citizen Ko* and *Connection by Fate*, Wan Jen seems to abandon the classical mode of telling a conventional story, turning instead to a meditative and poetic narrative, which generates a certain kind of alienating effect unfamiliar to, and unwelcomed by, audiences used to Hollywood movies. On the level of motives and issues, Wan Jen combines and negotiates between the concerns of Hou and Edward Yang through bringing Hou’s working class characters or southern villagers into Yang’s modern Taipei. On the level of film language and aesthetics, Wan Jen’s experiment is to integrate the genre elements smoothly into his search for and development of a style characteristic of his own signature. On the level of film aesthetics, Wan Jen lingers between the languages or styles of auteurism and popular cinema. In this respect, Wan Jen’s works contain a unique quality of “in-between,” which might aid further investigation into the richness and complexity of Taiwan New Cinema, shedding new light on current scholarship.

The quality of the “in-between” in Wan Jen’s works is noticeably present in his debut *The Taste of Apple*. The opening sequence noted above demonstrates Wan Jen’s mixed and negotiated styles of Hollywood movies and auteur films. This opening consists of a series of landscape shots of Taipei at dawn, a startling composition of images and sounds, rapid montage of the traffic accident, a pan from Colonel’s polished leather-shoes to Ah-Fa’s barefoot, and a close-up of the victim’s blood juxtaposed with the panoramic view of the urban ghetto. Moreover, the interior of the US Naval Hospital is
transformed, distorted, and stylized into a surreal space, a dreamy white heaven in the subjective shots of the working class local family. Comically, the stylized representation of the American hospital stands as a visual and symbolic contrast to the family’s miserable dwelling, the urban ghetto. Besides, the film also adopts the modernist technique of “stream of consciousness,” in Mrs. Ah-Fa’s subjective flash-back of the train scene. These techniques distinguish Wan Jen’s bold and creative experiments with the possibilities of filmic language as characteristic of a film auteur.

Curiously Wan Jen’s The Taste of Apple performs an auteur’s experiments within a Hollywood framework. First of all, Wan Jen tells the whole story with an unprecedented tone of black comedy unfolding the miserable tale through comical characters, clever jokes, and humorous dialogue. As the title “the taste of apple” suggests, this film has a bittersweet flavor. Secondly, the influence of Hollywood is most notable in the telephone scene at the opening. Right after the traffic accident, Wan Jen cuts to the shot of US Embassy Office, where the emergency is discussed on phone. Wan Jen renders this scene with setting and lighting characteristic of classical film noir: black silhouette standing by a dimly-lit window, shadowy interior, low-key lighting, an atmosphere of conspiracy or manipulation, and a hasty and mysterious talk about political crisis and deals. Thirdly, in contrast to the realistic diegetic-sound of the ghetto scene analyzed above, Wan Jen’s use of non-diegetic sound also betrays some Hollywood colors. For example, at the

19 Compare to Wu Chi-yen’s “Memories of Underdevelopment: review on several Taiwan films in 1983,” in Memories of Underdevelopment (Taipei: Tan Shan, 1993): 27-38. Wu attributes this film’s style of “exaggerated contrast” to “Italian comedy.” In particular, “Wan Jen employs realistic tones and settings to achieve stylistic contrast, such as the noble white of US Hospital vs. the muddy-black of the slum, likewise the quiet Americans vs. the noisy Taiwanese; thus, it naturally creates a visual and auditory contrast” (33-4).
cut from the film-noir telephone scene to the close-up of blood on the road, Wan Jen adds a piece of mysterious and suspenseful music à la Hitchcock to arouse spectators’ curiosity and emotions. Moreover, the piano motif, occurring three times in the film, imbues the tale with sadness and melancholy, eliciting pathos and sympathy. It is therefore not surprising that Wan Jen’s work occupies an ambiguous position in the remapped geography of two Taiwan New Cinemas, Hou and Edward Yang’s auteur works at one end, Wong and Yu’s commercial movies at the other. Locating Wan Jen’s works is a challenge requiring the deepest critical attention to establish Wan Jen’s academic locus in Taiwan’s cinematic topography and history.
Works Cited


