

George Chun Han Wang Bringing Laughter in Changing Times: Taiwan's Comedy Cinema

Since the Taiwanese New Cinema movement emerged three decades ago in the early 1980s, the world has enjoyed discovering cinematic gems made by Taiwan's iconic auteurs such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang and Ang Lee. Art-house films from Taiwan continue to generate international enthusiasm, but domestically, the island's comedy cinema has often been brushed aside as being crude, inferior, unoriginal and short of intellectual merit. Although there may be some truth in these disputable generalizations, comedy cinema nevertheless has continued to entertain the audience in Taiwan, earning heartfelt laughs and creating delightful memories in good times and bad times.

Throughout its complex history, Taiwan has had its share of difficult times. The Allied victory in the Pacific in 1945, ended five decades of colonial rule under Japan and Taiwan's sovereignty was taken over by the Republic of China (ROC). Having bid farewell to one oppressive regime, people of the "treasure island" also known as Formosa, came under a new government controlled by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese Kuomintang party (KMT). Discovering that this administration was also overbearing and corrupt, the local population rebelled. On February 28th 1947, an anti-government uprising was violently put down by the KMT, thousands were imprisoned and executed in this tragic event known as the 228 Incident, instigating the era of "White Terror." When the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949, KMT had lost control of mainland China to the Communists. Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC), while Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan, declaring the ROC as the legitimate government of China and Taipei as its temporary capital.

A massive migration of approximately 1.5 million mainlanders evacuated to Taiwan. Most of them did not speak the local Taiwanese dialect (*taiyu*) and miscommunication and clashes between mainland immigrants and the Japanese-raised locals aggravated KMT's lack of trust in the Taiwanese population's loyalty and patriotism. This post-colonial era of the Nationalist Government's heavy handed control, and its four decades of martial law (1949-1987) were characterized by social unrest and political turmoil.

Pioneering filmmaker Tang Shao-hua (1908-2010) directed Taiwan's first post-1949 comedy, the ironically-named *Everybody's Happy* (*Jie Da Huan Xi*, 1951). This song-and-dance feature was an early example of a "policy film." Under the authoritarian KMT administration, these were films in which ideological messages were incorporated into feature film content to boost morale

and promote nationalism and the government's view of a unified society.

In 1955, Tang made his second comedy feature *Where There Are No Women* (*Mei You Nu Ren De Di Fang*). The black and white film tells the story of seven well-educated bachelors who share an idyllic country residence, enjoying a "female-free" lifestyle. When one of them rescues a young lady at the beach and brings her home, all the men fall victim to her beauty and charm. Fierce competition for her affection ensues, their once male-only pad is suddenly dominated by an attractive woman out of nowhere. In the era's political climate, Tang had to end the film with upbeat moral values and the colorful characters commit themselves to serving society. Nonetheless, the surprisingly enjoyable *Where There Are No Women*, partially funded by private investments, was a significant crossover between a policy-film and a commercially oriented independent feature.

The lead actor of *Where There Are No Women* was none other than Lee Hsing/Li Xing (b. 1930), who went on to become one of Taiwan's most influential filmmakers. Having appeared in *Where There Is No Women* and several other films directed by Tang Shao-hua, Lee developed an interest in film production and became an assistant director for Tang in 1957.

It was propitious timing because following the tremendous success of the first post-war 35mm dialect feature, the opera film *Xue Ping-gui and Wang Bao-chuan* (*Xue Ping Gui Yu Wang Bao Chuan*, d. Ho Chi-ming/He Ji Ming, 1955) numerous privately funded Taiwanese-dialect films (*taiyu pian*) were made. Although not very fluent in Taiwanese-dialect, mainland-born Lee nonetheless became extensively involved in the popular *taiyu pian* movement, making his directorial debut in 1959 with *Brother Wang and Brother Liu on the Road in Taiwan* (*Wang Ge Liu Ge You Taiwan*). The Laurel and Hardy type comedy starred comedians Li Guan Zhang as the overweight shoeshiner Brother Wang, and Zhang Fu Cai (aka Shorty Cai) as the skinny rickshaw driver Brother Liu. The story begins with a fortuneteller's peculiar predictions that Brother Wang would become very wealthy, but Brother Liu would die in 44 days. When Brother Wang strikes gold by winning the lottery just as the fortuneteller foresaw, the celebratory mood is soon eclipsed when the two best friends recall the remainder of the prediction: the imminent death of Brother Liu. With his newfound wealth, Brother Wang decides to reward his dying buddy with the trip of a lifetime. Carrying a suitcase full of cash, the working-class duo embark on a road trip around the beautiful island of Taiwan. Practicing and enjoying a lavish lifestyle as very inexperienced big spenders, the duo find themselves in a series of unexpected situations and amusing predicaments. *Brother Wang and Brother Liu on the Road in Taiwan* became a huge success, spawning several sequels, making Li Guan Zhang and Zhang Fu Cai's on-screen personae Brother Wang and Brother Liu memorable household names.

Lee Hsing went on to direct more *taiyu pian* comedies including follow-up hits *Brother Wang*

and *Brother Liu's Happy New Year* (*Wang Ge Liu Ge Hau Guo Nian*, 1961), *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Triumphant Over Challenges* (*Wang Ge Liu Ge Guo Wu Guan Zhan Liu Jiang*, 1962). In 1962, Lee directed *Good Neighbors* (*Liang Xiang Hau*), a meaningful comedy depicting the sensitive real-life conflicts arising from the socio-economic divide between Taiwanese locals and the island's newest population of mainland immigrants. A mainlander himself, Lee positively portrayed the awkward situations and funny exchanges between two neighboring families, one Mandarin-speaking and the other Taiwanese-dialect speaking. As the first bi-lingual (Mandarin and *taiyu*) Taiwanese comedy, *Good Neighbors* paved the way for Lee's brilliant future career beyond *taiyu pian*. In 1962, Lee started making Mandarin films largely due to the "Mandarin only" language-unification policy implemented by the Nationalist Government. In the unique era marking Taiwan's rapid urbanization and economic growth, Lee became a forerunner of the government-sanctioned "Healthy Realism" genre with his highly praised melodramatic classics *Beautiful Duckling* (*Yang Ya Ren Jia*, 1964) and *The Silent Wife* (*Ya Nu Qing Shen*, 1965), both made for the state-run Central Motion Pictures Corporation (CMPC).

KMT's Mandarin-preferred governance rapidly marginalized the once favorable market for dialect films. In 1969, eighty-nine Mandarin features were made, exceeding the annual tally of *taiyu pian* produced for the first time in history by five films. It was in this milestone year that Mandarin titles officially became the mainstream in the Taiwan film market, replacing *taiyu pian*. The difficult situation of the fragile dialect-film market was made worse by the surge of household television viewing on the island. Many *taiyu pian* investors, filmmakers and actors eagerly embraced the thriving business of dialect-programming on television. By the mid-1970s, there



Lee Hsing's *Brother Wang and Brother Liu on the Road in Taiwan*
(*Wang Ge Liu Ge You Taiwan*, 1959)
Chinese Taipei Film Archive

was virtually no *taiyu pian* production activity, ending Taiwan's very special era of popular low-budget dialect cinema, in which an impressive 1,114 *taiyu pian* were completed between 1955 and 1975. Noteworthy comedies released in *taiyu pian*'s swan song years included *Silly Bride and Stupid Son* (*San Ba Xin Niang Han Zi Xu*, d. Hsin Chi/Shin Qi, 1967), *Kang-Ting's Tour of Taipei* (*Kang Ding You Tai Bei*, d. Wu Fei Chien/Wu Fei Jian, 1969), and several more *Brother Wang Brother Liu* sequels such as the James Bond spoof *Brother Wang and Brother Liu 007* (*Wang Ge Liu Ge Ling Ling Qi*, d. Wu Fei Chien, 1967), and the fantasy adventure *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Visiting the Underworld* (*Wang Ge Liu Ge You Di Fu*, d. Xu Shou Ren, 1969).

Acclaimed director Pai Ching-jui/Bai Jing Rui (1931-1997) partnered with Lee Hsing and other prominent filmmakers in 1969 to establish the Ta Chung Motion Picture Company (TCMPC). Collaborating with popular actress Chen Chen/Zhen Zhen (b. 1948) again after their successful romantic comedy *The Bride and I* (*Xin Niang Yu Wo*, 1969), Pai delivered a controversial film as the first feature release of the new company: *Accidental Trio* (*Jin Tian Bu Hui Jia*, 1969). The comedy tells the story of one rebellious daughter, two unfaithful husbands, and their brief escapes from home in search of a refuge, away from the suffocating urbanity and relentless boredom, that however eventually proves futile. Pai, an Italian-trained filmmaker, charmed the audience with his distinctive touch of Neorealism, earning heart-felt laughs from the film's understated humor. *Accidental Trio*'s complex plotlines depicting contemporary relationships marred by vanishing commitments and entangled infidelity, candidly and humorously documented everyday lives in a Taipei that was becoming industrialized and cosmopolitan. It was one of Taiwan's top-grossing films of 1969, making more than two million Taiwan dollars at the box office, and was also named one of the five best domestic features by Taiwan's film critics. However, the Nationalist government considered the film morally corrupting and a threat to the traditional values of a healthy society. Worsening the situation was its popular tune bearing the film's Chinese title "Jin Tian Bu Hui Jia" ("Not Going Home Today"). Perhaps the authority worried that such a "message" would stop the islands' youths and husbands from going home nightly. Even after Haishan Records' seemingly desperate attempt to alter the title of the original soundtrack album into the morally correct alternative of "Going Home Today," the song and the film were consequently banned. Yet such prohibition did not stifle the popularity of *Accidental Trio* from spreading beyond Taiwan. Its soundtrack album sold six hundred thousand copies in Hong Kong, sweeping songstress Yao Su-rong (b. 1946) to her career peak. Yao's sentimental rendition of the song made it a timeless melody across generations. Almost thirty years later, Sylvia Chang (b. 1953) directed her upbeat comedy *Tonight Nobody Goes Home* (*Jin Tian Bu Hui Jia*, 1996). Inspired by *Accidental Trio*, and bearing the same Chinese title, it was an apparent tribute to Pai Ching-jui's 1969 revolutionary and controversial comedy classic.

Accidental Trio's commercial success resulted in a spin-off comedy titled *From Home with Love* (*Jing Gao Tao Chi*, 1970). Billed as the "sister film" of *Accidental Trio*, director Chang Yung-hsiang/Zhang Yong Xiang (b. 1923), whose claim to fame was his debut screenplay *Beautiful Duckling*, carefully avoided the controversy suffered by *Accidental Trio*, by delivering an entertaining, less intellectual comedy packed with more laughs. Significantly, this was the first comedy role played by Taiwan's popular screen idol Ko Chun-hsiung/Ke Jun Xiong (b. 1945), celebrated for being the first Chinese actor to win the best actor award at the fourteenth annual Asia Pacific Film Festival, for his striking performance in Pai Ching-jui's directorial debut *Lonely Seventeen* (*Ji Mo De Shi Qi Sui*, 1967). In *From Home with Love*, Ko portrayed a hair salon owner who suspects his wife of having an affair with a wealthy client. His handsome hairdresser screen persona radiated no less charisma than Warren Beatty in *Shampoo* (1975). A year later, Ko collaborated with Lee Hsing in the romantic comedy *Love Styles XYZ* (*Ai Qing Yi Er San*, 1971), an anthology film consisting of three short stories. The mature, realistic and urban themes surrounding innocence, infidelity, deception and divorce in *Love Styles XYZ* clearly marked Lee Hsing's departure from the rural aesthetics and slapstick style of visual humor he professed more than a decade before with the *Brother Wang and Brother Liu* franchise.

Meanwhile, Ko Chun-hsiung reprised a lead role in yet another comedy feature *The Fake Tycoon* (*Miao Ji Le*, d. Lee Chia/Li Jia, 1971), an espionage spoof from the same TCMPC creative team comprising Lee Hsing as the executive producer and Chang Yung-hsiang as screenwriter. Lacking the cynical vigor found in *Accidental Trio* and *Love Styles XYZ*, the simplistic crime-solving plot and the clean, formulaic style of *The Fake Tycoon* were unsatisfactory byproducts of TCMPC's apparent compromise under the Nationalist government's intimidating censorship regulations.

Even though the rapid pace of economic growth continued unabated, the Seventies could be described as a decade of political hardship in Taiwan. In October, 1971, Taiwan's permanent membership as the Republic of China at the United Nations was replaced by the Communist-ruled People's Republic of China. Having lost its global legitimacy as a nation, the people of Taiwan soon learned the cruel reality of international isolation. In less than a year, as many as twenty-seven former allies across continents including Japan, Belgium and Mexico, abruptly discontinued formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan to seek new relationships with Communist China. United States president Richard Nixon's official visit to Mainland China in 1972 exacerbated the "state of crisis" consciousness in Taiwan. Further widespread uncertainty came with the death of Chiang Kai-shek on April 5th, 1975, followed by a month-long obligatory mourning. On January 1st, 1979, US President Jimmy Carter established official relations with the People's Republic of China, leaving old ally Taiwan and its political future in a gloomy cloud of instability.

Taiwan's film industry had no choice but to acclimatize itself to this turbulent period. Policy

films encouraging patriotism and nationalism dominated studio production schedules while escapist romantic films, many adapted from popular romance novels written by Chiung Yao/Qiong Yao (b. 1938), conquered the box office. In difficult times like these, there was little opportunity for comedy cinema to thrive. Nevertheless, many memorable Taiwan comedies lightened up this decade of hardship. Prolific director Ting Shan-hsi/Ding Shan Xi (1936-2009) added several comedies to his extensive filmography in the 1970s including musical comedy *Million Dollar Bride* (*Bai Wan Xin Niang*, 1970) and romantic tale *The Talent Girl* (*Gui Ma Xiao Tao Qi*, 1974) both starring Chen Chen. Ting also directed singer Louie Castro/Gu Si-Le/Jia Si Le in two popular comedies: *The Wonderful Small World* (*Xiao Xiao Shi Jie Miao Miao Miao*, 1978) and *My Lovely Neighbor* (*Wo Ai Fang Lin*, 1979). Fans of celebrated director-songwriter Liu Jia-chang (b. 1941), also known as Chen Chen's husband, crowded to *Four Seasons of Prosperity* (*Si Ji Fa Cai*, 1973), a lighthearted comedy predating many of his blockbuster romantic melodramas like *Gone with the Cloud* (*Yun Piao Piao*, 1974) and big-budget political epics such as *Mei Hua* (*Victory*, 1976). Having discovered future megastar Brigitte Lin/Lin Qing Xia (b. 1954) in his 1973 melodrama *Outside the Window* (*Chuang Wai*, 1973), legendary director Song Chun-so/Song Cun Shou (1930-2008) made a romantic comedy *News Hen* (*Nu Ji Zhe*, 1974) featuring a playfully charming Brigitte Lin as a workaholic television news correspondent. In the following years, Lin was featured in several lighthearted comedies including *Love by Post* (*Lian Ai Gong Fu*, 1976), and *My Funny Intern* (*Gui Ma Qiao Yi Sheng*, 1976), both from celebrated female director Chang Mei-chun/Zhang Mei Jun (1944-1985); as well as *Run Lover Run* (*Ai Ching Chang Pao*, 1975) and *The Chasing Game* (*Zui Chiu Zui Chiu*, 1976) directed by UCLA-educated Richard Chen Yao-chi/Chen Yao Qi (b. 1936). Chen's career in comedy began with the musical gem *Judy's Lucky Jacket* (*Wu Jia Zhi Bao*, 1972) starring sensational songstress Judy Ongg (b. 1950). *News Hen* leading hunk Chin Han/Qin Han (b. 1946) also headlined in *Hi, Honey* (*Hai Chin Ai De*, Lee Yung Chih/Li Rong Zhi, 1977) with beloved star Joan Lin/Lin Feng Jiao (b. 1953), who later became known as Mrs. Jackie Chan. As Taiwan's reigning idols of dreamy melodramas, Chin Han and Joan Lin effortlessly re-confirmed their celebrated big-screen chemistry through witty and cheerful performances in this romantic comedy produced by Pai Ching-ju.

In 1979, director Chang Pei-Cheng/Zhang Pei Cheng (b. 1941) made a big splash in the box office with his military comedy *Off to Success* (*Chen Gong Ling Shang*). A patriotic propaganda film with CMPC's strong financial backing and the nationalist government's unconditional endorsement, *Off to Success* boasted one of the largest ensemble casts rarely seen in any Taiwan films, featuring rumored rivals Joan Lin and Brigitte Lin in an unprecedented on-screen collaboration. A coming-of-age comedy about the two-month Chen Gong Ling military training camp every college-bound young man in Taiwan was obligated to enlist in, *Off to Success* effectively caricatured

a sometimes terrifying national rite of passage with vintage male-bonding humor and fitting political correctness. It sparked off a production boom of numerous military comedies to date and is especially noteworthy for featuring the first leading performance of Hsu Pu-liao/Xu Bu Liao (1951-1985), arguably the most talented comedian in Taiwan cinema history.

Hsu Pu-liao is said to have been brought up in a circus troupe by his stepfather from whom he learned to perform magic and tricks since early childhood. His big break came in 1977 while entertaining the troops on a military base. A high-ranking government official in that audience was impressed by his performance, thereby recruiting him as a contract actor for the state-run China Television Company (CTV). Born Ye Tie Xiong, his oddball screen name Hsu Pu-liao, which literally means “to suffer endlessly,” came from the breakthrough role he played in a popular CTV *taiyu* drama series based on the folklore *Legend of the White Snake*. He then joined *A Glimpse of Rainbow* (*Yi Dao Cai Hong*, 1978-1980), a top rated variety television show hosted by popular singer Feng Fei Fei (b. 1953), where he played her whimsical sidekick and a segment magician. After *Off to Success*, Hsu headlined several low-budget films including Ting Shan-hsi's contemporary farce *Up Stairs and Down Stairs* (*Lou Shang Lou Xia*, 1979), and the crudely made screwball martial arts comedy *Drunk Fish, Drunk Shrimp and Drunk Crab* (*Zui Yu Zui Xia Zui Pang Xie*, 1979) which veteran *taiyu pian* filmmaker Hsin Chi was too embarrassed to admit as his work. Although Hsu had already established himself as one of the funniest guys on television with several movies under his belt, it was his irresistible charisma as a sympathetic nobody in *The Clown* (*Xiao Cho*, 1980) that elevated him to superstardom. A directorial debut of young college student Kevin Chu/Chu Yen-ping/Zhu Yen Ping (b. 1950), this low budget comedy featured Hsu



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Pu-liao as an unpopular stage clown who falls so desperately in love with a blind girl that he is willing to sacrifice his life savings to pay for her eye surgery. In a performance reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin's *The Tramp* figure, Hsu rightfully earned the nickname "Taiwan's Chaplin" even though he is said to have never seen a Chaplin film prior to *The Clown*.

The overwhelming success of *The Clown* nonetheless became a scourge for Hsu Pu-liao and director Kevin Chu. The pair's box-office potential attracted attention from predatory investors with ties to organized crime. Both Hsu and Chu were coerced into binding commitments to deliver an unreasonable amount of films within extremely limited timeframes. In Kevin Chu's case, he wrote and directed approximately eight films per year immediately after *The Clown*, and admittedly acknowledged that those were the worst films of his career. As for Hsu Pu-liao, it is said that the greed-driven mobs were reluctant to allow him any break in production while his marketability was at its peak. They intoxicated Hsu with an ample supply of illegal drugs to keep him stimulated and under control day and night. Hsu was said to have worked continuously, putting in extremely long days without any sleep.

Not knowing how to say no, Hsu worked on more films in addition to those directed by Kevin Chu. Immediately after *The Clown*, Hsu starred in eight films in 1980. Then he appeared in ten films in 1981, thirteen in 1982, and eleven films in 1983. In one instance he eluded the movie set but was later found and forced to return to work. In despair, Hsu also attempted suicide. In 1984, Hsu was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis and other severe illness. Even though his health was irreversibly failing, Hsu managed to star in ten more films until he passed away in a hospital from cirrhosis-related heart failure in July 1985, at the young age of thirty-four. Three days after his death, his last collaboration with Kevin Chu, *The Clown and the Swan* (*Xiao Cho Yu Tian Er*, 1985) made its chart-topping premiere to an audience extremely saddened by the loss of this talented comedian. Hsu Pu-liao inexhaustibly kept moviegoers entertained from 1979 to 1985 in 64 films, the majority of them comedies, including his impressive (and singular) directorial effort, *The Taxi Driver* (*Ji Dan Shi Tou Peng*, 1981) which was made for the company operated by martial arts superstar Jimmy Wang Yu (b. 1943). Those seven years were irrefutably the golden age of comedy cinema in Taiwan, despite the fact that most of Hsu's films were insufficiently funded, badly written, and hastily made with repetitious usage of unoriginal plotlines plagiarized from other comedies, most noticeably Chaplin's *City Lights* and *The Kid*. Such inferior qualities in Hsu's films were largely ignored by his loyal fans, the majority of whom were blue-collar workers. It was Hsu's authentic talent to generate laughter and tears that kept bringing the audience back to the theatres for more. Such star power was rarely exhibited by any other actor in Taiwan's cinema history.

In his post-Hsu Pu-liao career, Kevin Chu continued with an extremely successful run of blockbusters, solidifying his powerhouse status in commercial filmmaking. Specialized in popular

comedies for all ages, Chu managed to generate one record-breaking movie after another for the rest of the 1980s. Local audiences flocked to the theatres for comedies bearing the Kevin Chu brand name, among them *Kung Fu Kids* (*Hao Xiao Zi*, d. Chang Mei-Chun, 1985), *New Recruits* (*Da Tou Bing*, 1987), and *It's A Mad Mad Prison* (*Bao Gao Dian Yu Zhang*, 1987).

In the same decade when Kevin Chu became Taiwan's King of Comedy, world festival juries and film critics were captivated by the realistic portrayals and critical explorations of lives and experiences reflected in Taiwan's New Cinema masterworks. However, many of the finest New Cinema titles, although globally celebrated, were regarded locally as elitist, idiosyncratic and irrelevant to the working class audience. While many were considered box office poison, some of the most memorable New Cinema titles generated financial success along with bittersweet laughs.

The tragicomedy *The Sandwich Man* (*Er Zi De Da Wan Ou*, d. Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tseng Chuang-Hsiang and Wan Ren, 1983) was regarded as the motion picture that inaugurated the New Cinema movement. The last of the three vignettes in this anthology is the Wan Jen/Wan Ren (b. 1950) helmed *The Taste of Apples* (*Ping Guo De Zi Wei*). The film humorously depicts the awkward luxury a poor laborer comes to enjoy in his comfortable hospital bed after being hit by an American military vehicle. Although the car accident broke his leg, he becomes the envy of the neighborhood because of the special "American" treatment his family receives, among many the imported apples, unattainably pricy for common folks in those days. Such clever and ironic humor is reprised in Wan's *Super Citizen Ko* (*Chao Ji Shi Min*, 1985), a chronicle of the 1950s White Terror era appropriately promoted as "a satirical film bringing tears in laughter." In the same year, New Cinema frontrunner Wang Tung/Wang Tong (b. 1942) delivered a sentimental parody in his masterpiece *Strawman* (*Dao Cao Ren*, 1987). In an engaging tale set in Japanese colonized Taiwan during World War II, two naive brothers happily discover a huge undetonated bomb on their farmland. Anticipating big rewards, they haul it across the city, only to be reprimanded by the terrified Japanese police chief who orders them to immediately dispose of the bomb. The brothers sadly throw the bomb into the ocean. What they assumed was a dud explodes underwater. The powerful blast kills more fish than the jubilant brothers can carry back to their village, where they generously share the delicious rewards with all their neighbors. Poignant, witty and at times hilariously funny, *Strawman* won the best picture nod at the 1987 Golden Horse Awards and deservedly became the first comedy feature to win this honor. Two years later, Wang's engaging combination of humor and sentimentalism was reprised with yet another masterpiece, *Banana Paradise* (*Xiang Jiao Tian Tang*, 1989).

Several other noteworthy Taiwan comedies from the 1980s included *Six is Company* (*Qiao Ru Cai Die Fei Fei Fei*, d. Chen Kun-hou, 1984), *I Love Mary* (*Wo Ai Ma Li*, d. Ko Yi Cheng, 1984), *The Oxcart Filled With Dowry* (*Jia Zhuang Yi Niu Che*, d. Chang Mei-Chun, 1984), and the exceeding-

ly enjoyable family suspense comedy *Teenage Fugitive* (*Xiao Tao Fan*, d. Chang Pei-cheng, 1984) written by Tsai Ming-liang (b. 1957) who would become an international art-house and film festival favorite with such films as *Rebels of a Neon God* (*Ch'ing shaonien ne cha*, 1992). Other highlights that added to this prosperous decade of Taiwan cinema were films from director Chin Ao Hsun/Jin Ao Shun (b. 1947) including the *Off to Success*-influenced military comedies such as the Hsu Pu-liao co-star vehicle *Happy Days in the Army* (*Dong Yuan Ling*, 1982), *Thank You Sir* (*Qi Chuang Hao*, 1987) and the sequel-spawning megahit *Yes Sir!* (*Bao Gao Ban Zhang*, 1987).

It is probably not widely known that New Cinema pioneer Hou Hsiao-hsien (b. 1947) began his directing career with romantic comedies *Cute Girls* (*Jiu Shi Liu Liu De Ta*, 1980) and *Cheerful Wind* (*Feng Er Ti Ta Cai*, 1981), both starring popular idols Feng Fei Fei and Kenny Bee/Zhong Zhen Tao (b. 1953). Another comedy of the period, *The Juvenizer* (*Zhong Shen Da Shi*, 1981), was a clever satire about the booming health craze and Taiwan's unregulated dietary supplement industry. A rare contemporary comedy from legendary filmmaker King Hu/Hu Jin Quan (1932-1997) it was disappointing flop at the box-office and seemingly signaled the decline of Hu's remarkable career.

With the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan's film industry entered into the 1990s with three remarkable comedy dramas from Ang Lee (b. 1954). In his "Father Knows Best" trilogy including *Pushing Hands* (*Tui Shou*, 1991), *The Wedding Banquet* (*Xi Yen*, 1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (*Yin Shi Nan Nu*, 1994), Lee masterfully incorporated his themes of cultural clashes and generational confrontation in delightful and at times whimsical situations. In 1992, playwright Stan Lai/Lai Sheng-Chuan (b. 1954) directed a film adaptation of his acclaimed stage production *The Peach Blossom Land* (*An Lian Tao Hua Yuan*, 1992), an unusual psychological tragicomedy that generated rave reviews.

From the mid-1990s onwards, Taiwan's film industry spiraled into an unprecedented decline, caused by out-of-control video piracy and fierce competition from Hollywood and Hong Kong productions. Only a small number of domestically made films were profitable, many of them comedy features such as the ever-popular military-franchise *Yes Sir!* sequels *No, Sir* (*Bao Gao Ban Zhang San*, d. Chin Ao-Hsun, 1994), *Trust Me, You Can Make It* (*Bao Gao Ban Zhang-Nu Bing Bao Dao*, d. Lin Buo Sheng, 1997), and *The Last Salute* (*Bao Gao Ban Zhang Liu-Bao Gao Zhong Si Ling*, d. Chin Ao-Hsun, 2000). Kevin Chu continued to produce chart-topping *Kung Fu Kid* inspired comedies featuring adorably invincible child martial arts prodigies in films like *Shaolin Popey* (*Shao Lin Xiao Zi*, 1994), *Messy Temple* (*Xin Wu Long Yuan*, 1994) and *Kunfu Kid* (*Ye Man Xiao Zi*, 2003). Kevin Chu's collaborations with Hsu Pu-liao in the early 1980s, such as *Who Is the Real Tycoon?* (*Zhen Jia Da Heng*, 1980), *The Partner* (*Tian Cai Chun Cai*, 1980), *Funny Soldier* (*Sha Bing Li Da Gong*, 1981), and *Playboy* (*Sha Ding You Sha Fu*, 1982) have been released as DVDs in Taiwan since

early 2010, providing old and new moviegoers with an opportunity to experience the decades-old fascination of Hsu Pu-liao comedies. In recent years, Chu has filmed in mainland China, expanding his repertoire to the lucrative territories with hit comedies such as Jay Chou headliner *Kung Fu Dunk* (*Gong Fu Guan Lan*, 2008) and the newly released *Just Call Me Nobody* (*Da Xiao Jiang Hu*, 2010).

Back home in Taiwan, novice filmmaker Wei Te-Shen/Wei De Sheng (b. 1969) astonished the industry with his directorial debut *Cape No. 7* (*Hai Jiao Qi Hao*, 2008), a romantic comedy about a dejected musician rediscovering passion, love and hope through transforming a rock band of misfit amateurs into an overnight concert sensation. The sleeper hit broke all records to become the top-selling domestic feature with NT\$500 million (US\$16.9 million) nationwide earnings. It defeated even the toughest competition from Hollywood, trailing behind only *Avatar* (2009) and *Titanic* (1997) in the island's all-time box office records. While a single hit alone may not revive an entire industry, the success of *Cape No. 7* certainly delivered a strongly hopeful message to local filmmakers who might otherwise have given up. Domestic production has now increased to more than 40 releases per year, from fewer than ten just a few years earlier. Befittingly, it took a comedy film to ignite some much needed optimism for Taiwan's struggling motion picture industry, proving that in good times and bad times, the power of laughter can always bring back even the long-lost audience of years past and put a heartfelt smile on their faces.

The future for comedy in Taiwan looks bright. Taiwanese comedy has retained its distinctive character despite rapid industrialization, social change and economic growth over the past six decades. Heartwarming portrayals of underprivileged individuals, their down-to-earth lives and the wonder and humor of extraordinary encounters are the formulaic components that have continued to draw local audiences and make them laugh. Taiwanese cinema provides a rich and complex backdrop unique among Chinese-language films because of the historical influence of Japanese culture and the island's diverse composition of Taiwanese, Hakka, mainland Chinese and indigenous cultures. In a market long dominated by star-driven Hong Kong films and Hollywood blockbusters, such vernacular characteristics have made Taiwan's memorable comedies unique and financially successful.

Since the late 1950s, filmgoers in Taiwan discovered humor in the daring journeys of Brother Wang and Brother Liu, chuckled at the amusing caricatures of Hsu Pu-liao, and adored the child kung fu prodigies of Kevin Chu. They enjoyed the numerous coming-of-age adventures of military rookies, and happily sang along with the hilarious misfits in the rock band of *Cape No. 7*. The unique ingredients that generated laughter in Taiwan, however, especially in the case of *Cape No. 7*, have puzzled audiences in mainland China and elsewhere. *Cape No. 7*'s dynamic and localized humor, for example, makes it too complex for outsiders to appreciate. Likewise, what makes

audiences laugh in China might fall short across the straits. *Just Call Me Nobody*, Kevin Chu's kung fu comedy filmed in China, and one of the year's top box office hits there, premiered to an underenthusiased audience in Taiwan. As Chu shifts his focus more toward the mainland, he leaves big shoes to fill. But Taiwanese audiences have been happily served with an invigorating wave of comedy of comedy titles in the last year, among them the romantic sensation *Au Revoir Taipei* (*Yi Ye Tai Bei*, Arvin Chen, 2010), the critically acclaimed *Pinoy Sunday* (*Tai Bei Xing Qi Tian*, Wi Ding Ho, 2010), and the vibrant blockbuster *Night Market Hero* (*Ji Pai Ying Xiong*, Yeh Tien-lun, 2011).

A young generation of filmmakers from diverse backgrounds has shown it has refreshing stories to tell. They are establishing new trends and changing old tastes. As they inject revitalizing energy onto the big screen, optimism is in the air for Taiwan's comedy cinema.

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