

Anthony Kao

Chinese 153

Prof. Andrew F. Jones

10 May 2013

One Film, Two Island Nations

Introduction

One intriguing area of distinction between contemporary Taiwanese cinema and its counterparts in other East Asian countries like South Korea and China is its frequent positive portrayals of Japan and Japanese characters. Whereas Chinese and Korean cinema's attitudes towards Japan are often characterized by a "feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered" during Japan's imperialist ventures, the warm reception of films like Wei Te-Sheng's 2008 *Cape No. 7* paints a different picture of Taiwanese sentiments (Vick 115). Although *Cape No. 7* is certainly one of the most notable and recent examples of this arguably pro-Japan tilt in post-democratization Taiwan cinema, I would like to examine a somewhat earlier instance of the same phenomenon: New Wave director Edward Yang's 2000 drama *Yi Yi*. In doing this, I aim to answer two main questions of a) how Yang stylistically executes this positive depiction of Japan/Japanese characters and b) why this type of outlook is more common in Taiwanese cinema than its counterparts in the rest of East Asia.

Yi Yi offers two main links to Japan. The first is formed from the relations between protagonist NJ and his former lover Sherry, who reconnect when NJ is on a business trip in Japan. Here, Japan is associated with a deep sense of nostalgia. The second is through the character Ota, a Japanese video game executive who NJ's company wants to court into a partnership; Ota is shown as a brotherly "good man" in opposition to competing copycat Taiwanese businessmen.

On a broader level, these two narrative strands mirror prevalent views of Japan from Taiwan's contemporary socio-political landscape. I will bring in academic sources to prove how strikingly similar ideas of longing for a Japanese past and holding Japan up as an upright exemplar worthy of friendship arose in Taiwanese society around the year 2000, when *Yi Yi* was made. Although Yang did not set out to make any "overt statements about Japan" in *Yi Yi*, this contextualizing examination is still useful as a window into how social context allowed some narrative ideas to flourish onscreen, and not as an argument for how *Yi Yi* is some sort of direct political allegory (Berry 291). As a New Wave director, Yang and his counterparts strived to represent more localized Taiwanese stories; my analysis of *Yi Yi* aims to shed insight on how, explicitly or implicitly, one particular strand of these real-world, local narratives helped shape narratives on film.

A "Lingering Lost Love" for Japan

At the beginning of *Yi Yi*, protagonist NJ, an electrical engineer at a Taiwanese technology company, bumps into Sherry, his first love that he has not seen in over 30 years, at a wedding. One of NJ's friends encourages NJ to get in touch with her – and eventually, on a business trip to craft a partnership with Japanese businessman Ota, NJ meets up with her in Japan. During the scenes depicting that encounter, Yang's stylistic techniques associate NJ's old affections for Sherry with the physical location of Japan. NJ and Sherry's relationship could implicitly act as an analog to Japan's relationship with Taiwan during the colonial period, as well as connect to dialogs of Taiwanese localization.

NJ's trip to Japan begins with a long tracking shot from a train travelling beside the sleek, orderly office buildings of Tokyo at night. This simultaneously situates the viewer firmly in Japan and confirms that NJ has travelled far, far away from the often messy, incongruous constructions of

Taipei, where most of *Yi Yi* is set. A wistful piano ballad plays all throughout, fading away only when the Tokyo cityscape cuts to NJ getting out of a taxi and passionately embracing Sherry in front of a hotel. This non-diegetic music imbues a strong sense of nostalgia into the journey that NJ has made, and the fact that it culminates with him hugging Sherry highlights the romantic undertones of the ballad. Combining these two stylistic threads, viewers see a romanticized Japan intensely associated with a sense of melancholic longing.

After this initial meeting, NJ and Sherry go on what is essentially a consecutive sequence of dates in a bevy of locations around the Tokyo area. This builds upon the sense of longing that Yang has already associated with Japan by illustrating how Japan is intimately connected with a bygone, idyllic past. The most striking fact about these particular scenes is how Yang uses crosscutting to intersperse NJ's dates with Sherry in Japan with NJ's daughter Ting-Ting's first date back in Taipei. Yang accomplishes this not only through cutting between similar visual situations, but also by building sound bridges between scenes occurring in Tokyo and Taipei.

For instance, NJ starts this series of scenes by recalling how nervous he was on his first date with Sherry. His narration is overlaid on shot of train tracks which, similarly to the previous train-borne tracking shot, helps bring the narrative back to Taipei where Ting-Ting is nervously determining what to wear for her own first date. A little while later, Ting-Ting asks her boyfriend Fatty what time it is while walking around a movie theater in Taipei; even before the visual shot transitions back to Tokyo, a conversation between Sherry and NJ about what time it is seeps in as Ting-Ting and Fatty stroll off. Sherry and NJ finish that conversation by talking about the first time they held hands before watching a movie at Ximending, which brings a cut to Fatty reaching for Ting-Ting's hand in Ximending, and then another cut back to NJ grasping Sherry's hand back in

Japan. As NJ appropriately reminisces: “it’s a different place, a different time, and we’re different ages – but it’s the same hand”.

Yang’s use of crosscutting helps directly link Japan to a more pure, sublime past, as represented by the innocence inherent in Ting-Ting’s first date. In this sense, Japan is a rather positive location – a place where people can rekindle old romances and relive happier, simpler times lost to electrical engineering degrees and the superficialities of business. These in-film feelings seem to precisely reflect popular perceptions among some Taiwanese as democratization took hold in the 90s. Many, especially older Taiwanese, regarded the Japanese colonial period with the same kind of “fond memories of childhood” Yang stylistically conveys in his film (Sun 798). For example, in a 2004 poll of Taiwanese born under Japanese rule in the 30s, a staggering 94% of respondents said that they had “good” or “quite good” impressions of their childhood Japanese teachers” (Sun 798).

Analogously, like Sherry, Japan is almost like an old flame to these Taiwanese: a former “lover” from a more innocent past who leaves all too suddenly. They recall how the Japanese, as “strict but fair” colonizers, brought infrastructure like “railways and irrigation” as well as “education and public health services”, everything that Taiwan ostensibly needed to mature into a modern economic powerhouse (Brown 466). When Japan left in 1945, as abruptly as Sherry leaves NJ in Japan at the end of *Yi Yi*, a darker time of White Terror and repression arrives. In the eyes of these Taiwanese, through “some sort of comparative politics of the colonized”, “the earlier colonizers turned out to be a better set” (Lam 251). As “most Taiwanese suffered worse oppression, discrimination, and economic hardship under Nationalist rule than Japanese,” it would make sense that some sort of “colonial nostalgia” would emerge to define the Taiwanese experience (Brown 470).

Predictably, a clear revival of yearnings for Japan occurred within a broader context of Taiwanese localization after Lee Tung-hui took office in 1988 (Sun 794). In a democratized, post-martial law context, “expressing regard for Japan was a common, indirect way of criticizing the Nationalist regime” (Brown 470). More importantly, as a new, distinctly “Taiwanese” identity formed, the experience of Japanese colonialism helped distinguish “Taiwanese” from “Chinese” or “Mainlander” (Sun 797). “Vivid evidence” of this conception is evident in anecdotes which describe how, “shortly after martial law was lifted, some elderly Taiwanese men began to wear Japanese imperial army hats on city buses, greatly offending Mainlanders” (Brown 470). The fact that NJ and Sherry’s dialog is virtually all in Taiwanese instead of Mandarin may even reflect a similar idea: only those with a certain local, Taiwanese identity can truly experience the sort of longing NJ and Sherry do.

Thus, we have a partial explanation for why contemporary Taiwan cinema contains such positive portrayals of Japan. In order to more accurately tell local stories, New Wave directors like Yang would logically end up crafting narratives that echo the localizing sentiments of the time, which included thoughts of Japan as something of a “lingering lost love”, the better colonial alternative to more recent memories of KMT authoritarianism.

Partnering with “Good Man” Japan

On a similar note, Yang’s depiction of Ota, the owner of a Japanese video game company, is another instance from *Yi Yi* of a positive representation of Japan that tacitly displays real-world political and social significances.

At the beginning of the film, NJ’s colleagues get the idea to partner with Ota when their company is about to go bust, thinking that Ota’s prestigious brand name will save their company from ruin. Indeed, Ota’s first scene seems to portray him as just that, a savior. The scene begins

with a sound bridge cut away from a pregnant character's hospital room to the ultrasound image of a baby. Instead of the sounds of a hospital, however, the diegetic sound of this image is of a translator speaking Japanese-accented Mandarin, translating Ota's speech about the "limitless future for video games", superimposed over reminders of a fragile life coming into existence conveyed through the rhythmic beat of the baby's heart.

Here, the film intimately associates Ota with rejuvenation and rebirth – indeed, he is here to bring a new lease of life to NJ's ailing company. Ota's translated dialog is prophet-like: he links video games with discovering one's humanity, declaring that "we only have fighting and killing games not because we haven't fully understood computers, but because we haven't fully understood ourselves as human beings". Later, the ultrasound image cuts to a low-lit shot of Ota. His face partially is obscured by a laptop as colored lights flash behind his back as if projecting the glow of a Buddha; when his presentation ends, birds flutter towards the heavens as soon an assistant opens the curtains. This projects an aura of mystery and sanctity, further solidifying the Japanese Ota's characterization as a mystical redeemer.

NJ seems taken in by the genuineness of Ota's message. However, the film does hint that this is not universally the case. In the same scene, to NJ's colleagues the low-light setting acts as a method of accentuating their boredom and displeasure: some of them take advantage of the situation to suck on pipes or drift off to sleep. Actually, these profit-driven colleagues believe that there is a cheaper, local alternative called Ato who may do the trick.

Nevertheless, at his colleagues' request, NJ and Ota dine at a fancy restaurant in Taipei after the initial presentation to mull over a potential partnership. In this scene, Ota's composure and dialog set him apart from NJ's colleagues. Ota speaks in an animated yet slow fashion, his sentences interspersed with statements of gratitude and self-reflection, showing how he thinks

before he speaks and commits a degree of emotional investment into conversations. Compared to the dismissively brisk pace at which NJ's colleagues gravitate towards copycat Ato in the previous scene, this slower pace is rather elegant and genuine. Complementing this image, Ota's words carries a heavy air of honesty – which again directly contrasts with how NJ's colleagues are willing to pitch lies to investors. Bluntly declaring that he “cannot tell a lie”, Ota openly admits his company “lost big money” in the previous year and realistically acknowledges that the business partnership may not work out.

After dinner, NJ brings Ota to a bar, where Ota quickly becomes the night's main attraction. While Ota and NJ share drinks, a musician plays in the background. The ambient noise of intermittent laughter and a bout of lukewarm applause indicate that the bar's patrons all but ignore the unfortunate musician. Then, the film abruptly cuts to Ota sitting at the bar's piano, playing a rousing Japanese song to which the audience happily sings and claps along, shouting “one more, one more” when it ends. Amidst the happy cacophony Ota has brought in, the bartender implores NJ: “bring more Japanese friends like him – times are hard, and he'll help make for a better atmosphere”.

Unfortunately, the good times do not last. As Ota predicts, the partnership does not work out, which NJ discovers over a hotel room phone after meeting with Ota in Japan. Indignant at the orders of his unscrupulous colleague, who is further dehumanized by a tinny telephone voice, NJ tearfully exclaims: “this hurts, you know, Ota is a good man – how can we uphold our dignity now?” before slamming down the phone. Overall, throughout the film we see a highly positive portrayal of Ota, *Yi Yi*'s main portal into Japan. Through both style and dialog, he comes off as a refined, honest, “good man” who brings along a “better atmosphere” and potential salvation. Ota

can even be seen as the moral exemplar of the film: his notions of truth and human nature deeply influence NJ, and in fact win out over the conniving of NJ's colleagues in the end.

Accordingly, if upright, non-antagonistic Japanese characters like Ota rarely appeared in Chinese and Korean films of the period, what differences in Taiwan's context allowed Yang to introduce such a character (Vick 115)? The answer lies in a close social, political, and economic "commingling process" that occurred as "Japan and Taiwan began rapidly approaching each other again" during Taiwan's democratization in the 90s (Sun 791). This process created numerous conceptions of Japan and the Japanese that are reflected in Ota's character traits.

To many Taiwanese politicians, "Japan and China acted as poles defining boundaries of political imagination" for Taiwan's future (Sun 798). After being elected to office several months before *Yi Yi*'s release in 2000, DPP President Chen Shui-Bian began pushing for a mutual defense treaty with Japan similar to the Taiwan Relations Act, hoping to have brother Japan protect Taiwan alongside father America (Bridges 578). In their explorations of buying Japanese military equipment and promoting Japan-Taiwan military cooperation, pro-independence advocates like Chen saw Japan as a great ally. To them, Japan was yet another "major force in addition to the US" to deter threats from China (Bridges 588). In this role, Japan is a savior – just as Ota is a savior for NJ's company in *Yi Yi*. Additionally, similar to how NJ's colleagues are reluctant to partner with Ota, there were major segments of Taiwanese society around 2000, like the military, which were still "deeply suspicious of Japan" and the costs of a pro-Japan orientation (Sun 806).

Socially, in the late 90s there arose a "cult-like following among younger generation in Taiwan" of Japanese popular culture following liberalization of government controls. These Japanophiles began to "regard Japan as their cultural mecca", a place of sophistication deserving of close emulation. In combination with aforementioned positive sentiments for Japan among older

generations, this resulted in “a cross-generational effort for Taiwanese to reach out and deepen ties with Japan” (Sun 799). In this sense, Ota rides on the Japanese wave – his musical success in *Yi Yi*’s bar scene is not unlike that of the countless Japanese pop idols who swept across Taiwan during this period. Furthermore, his refinement and complexity connect with the idea of Japan as a cultural exemplar, a friendly northern neighbor who is always welcome to return and “improve the atmosphere”.

Desires to emulate and idealize Japan were not restricted to cultural landscapes. In the 90s, Lee Tung-hui often highlighted how Taiwan should learn from Japan in order to build upon “common values of market capitalism, liberal democracy, and human rights” (Lam 258). Around 2000, many politicians from the DPP and even the KMT (e.x. James Soong) also indicated an “increasing desire for Japan to play a larger political role in international affairs”; these appeals often represented Japan as “a good friend and honest broker” who could moderate tensions in East Asia (Lam 257). Accordingly, it is unsurprising that it would be acceptable to see Ota as an “honest” man, a mediator who tells the truth and is a “good friend” to NJ. Just as Taiwan could conceivably learn about common democratic values from Japan, so too does the Taiwanese NJ learn that there are still honest businessmen in the world by meeting the Japanese Ota.

Conclusion

It would be inappropriate to simply reduce Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* down to a political allegory. However, it would also be imprudent to completely ignore the potential social influences that may have influenced the creation of its narratives, and the narratives of other movies within New Wave Taiwan Cinema. In contrast to Chinese or Korean works, Taiwanese films like *Yi Yi* depicted Japan and Japanese characters in a good light due to complex differences in the composition of Taiwanese identity, politics, and society. Local perspectives on Taiwan were

“colored” by their “oppression under Nationalist rule”, resulting in flare-ups of nostalgia towards a better alternative, namely Japanese colonialism (Brown 470). This became linked to the broader political movements of localization and democratization that flourished in the decade prior to *Yi Yi*’s release. Consequently, ideas sympathetic to Japan that were prominent in the discourse of those movements naturally diffused into directors like Yang’s attempts to convey genuine local stories within the archetypes of New Wave Taiwan Cinema; Yang himself even acknowledged that in Taiwan, “everything was influenced by Japan”, and Japan was therefore the “most natural and justifiable” foreign element to include in *Yi Yi* (Berry 291).

Whether or not Yang and these directors agreed with the ideas they depicted on film is not particularly important. Put in other terms, directors are like naturalist painters illustrating a mountain scene: whether or not a painter likes the Douglas firs on the mountain is irrelevant. In order to accurately show details of the scene, he will paint them anyways. Thus, to accurately illustrate the local scenery of Taiwan in *Yi Yi*, Yang would inevitably have to include the cherry blossoms that drifted in front of his lens.

Citations

1. Berry, Michael. "Edward Yang: Luckily Unlucky." *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 273-95. Print.
2. Bridges, Brian, and Che-Po Chan. "Looking North: Taiwan's Relations with Japan under Chen Shui-Bian." *Pacific Affairs* 81.4 (2009): 577-96. Print.
3. Brown, Melissa J. "Changing Authentic Identities: Evidence from Taiwan and China." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16.3 (2010): 459-79. Print.
4. Lam, Peng-Er. "Japan-Taiwan Relations: Between Affinity and Reality." *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 30.4 (2004): 249-67. Print.
5. Sun, Jing. "Japan-Taiwan Relations: Unofficial in Name Only." *Asian Survey* 47.5 (2007): 790-810. Print.
6. Vick, Tom. *Asian Cinema: A Field Guide*. New York: Collins, 2007. Print.
7. *Yi Yi: A One and a Two*. Dir. Edward Yang. Perf. Nien-Jen Wu, Elaine Jin, Issei Ogata, Kelly Lee. Kuzui Enterprises, 2000. DVD.