

Walking out of Sadness: the Other Side of Taiwan Cinema*

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Abstract

City of Sadness (1989) marks the beginning of an end in the history of Taiwan cinema. For the past 20 years, Taiwan cinema was heavily politicized in which, on one hand, it was embedded with government propaganda, or, on the other hand, it became a tool to explore historical trauma left by the Japanese colonialization and the KMT post-colonial rule.

This paper would like to explore another side of Taiwan cinema, which can be tentatively classified as the “youth nostalgia” films. This trend starts with *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002), in which friendship and sexual awakening were foregrounded to portray the lives of three main characters in their high school days. It then was followed by films such as *Eternal Summer* (2006), *Summer’s Tail* (2007), *Secret* (2007), *Wind of September* (2008), and recently *You’re the Apple of My Eye* (2011). The milieu for these films is mainly at the high school campus. The narrative circles around their school life, rites of passage, hetero- and/or homo-sexual relationships among friends. High school years in these films are depicted as good old days. Even the imagery is sometimes tinted with yellowish color to evoke nostalgic feeling. Most important of all, those films are depoliticized to the extent that social law and order, the burdens of Taiwan history, and adult figures are all absent from the narrative. These films signify a new opening for Taiwan cinema to “walk out of sadness.”

Key words: Taiwan cinema, *City of Sadness*, *Blue Gate Crossing*, *You’re the Apple of My Eye*

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Cinema of Sadness

We can use one word to conclude Taiwan cinema before 1989: sadness. Due to many unforeseeable historical circumstances, including the Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945), the Chinese nationalism of the KMT government after WWII, Cold War politics, the Feb. 28th Incident of 1947, White Terror era (1950s-1970s), and the Martial Law era (1949-1987), people on this small island are never their own masters. Taiwanese cannot decide their fate, nor their national identity; in some extreme cases, they are not sure of their own names. In fact, they cannot even proclaim that they are Taiwanese. Two films produced in 1989, *Banana Paradise* and *City of Sadness*, mark the conclusion of the ethos of sadness in Taiwan cinema.

Scene 1:

Banana Paradise is the first film depicting the fate of the so-called “old veterans” who followed the defeated KMT government to Taiwan in 1949. They always thought that their stay in Taiwan was only temporary and that they would eventually go back to their homes in China. The Cold War destroyed their dream. The stalemate on two sides of the Taiwan Strait, signifying the tension between KMT government and Chinese Communist government, forced them to stay in Taiwan for the rest of their lives. The protagonist “Door Latch” (a nickname) adopted many names in order to survive and to escape to Taiwan. He finally settled for “Mr. Lee” and became a university graduate and a small bureaucrat, even though he could hardly read. Mr. Lee and his wife, Yueh-Shiang, thus became a “wartime couple” and together they raised Mr. Lee’s son to his adulthood.

After the long period of Martial Law was lifted in 1987, the KMT government finally released the restriction to visit mainland China. Unbeknownst to his parents, Lee’s son went to China to find his grandfather, optimistically headstrong that his “father” and the grandfather could talk to each other after a forty-year break of communication. The problem of course is that Door Latch was never truly surnamed “Lee.” Then, a bigger secret was unfolded: Yueh-Shiang, who had been Door Latch’s wife for the past 40 years, was a fake, too. She disguised herself as Mr. Lee’s wife so that she could keep her promise, after the real Lee couple died, to raise their children for saving her own life. So it is really ironic that, during the national crisis, two strangers became husband and wife and raised a child not coming from either one. It is believed that an immediate family of this sort was not unusual among those Chinese escaping to Taiwan from 1946 to 1949. It also seems like a political allegory that KMT government migrated from mainland to establish themselves on Taiwan and in effect raised Taiwan as if a child not entirely their own.

When a telephone call from Hong Kong came, Door Latch/Mr. Lee picked up the phone without any clue of who the old man was on the other end. However, as soon as he heard the voice of an old man on the other end of the line calling him “son,” he began transferring his love and regret for his own father to this stranger, and begging for forgiveness for failing a son’s duty by running away from home for so long. Upon

hearing that mother was dead (actually Mr. Lee's mother, not his own), he cried hysterically, blaming himself as an unfilial son, until exhausted.

We have to believe that Door Latch's feelings are genuine. By displacing this old man with his own father, he expresses the sorrow and regret of his generation for not being able to be with their parents, due to war and ideological rivalry between KMT and Chinese Communist Party. Worst of all, there are many people like him who conceal their personal identities, such as name, age, birthplace, etc, during war time. In the end, they find out that they will never switch back to their original identity.



(Left: *Banana Paradise*; Right: *City of Sadness*)

Scene 2:

City of Sadness foregrounds the tragedy of the Feb. 28th Incident of 1947. Put simply, the tragedy was the result of the distrust that the KMT government had toward Taiwanese people, who were treated as “secondary citizens” after the 50-year colonial rule by the Japanese government. The four brothers of the Lin family in the film represent different fates of Taiwanese during the transition period between the Japanese colonial government and the KMT government. The eldest brother was once considered as a mobster by the Japanese, which meant that he must have done something violating rules set up by the latter. Ironically, he was accused and almost arrested as a “Japanese collaborator” after the KMT came to Taiwan. Puzzled that a Taiwanese like himself would be “disliked” and “hated” by two oppositional regimes, he uttered the famous line in the film: “We Taiwanese are the pitiest. Everyone eats us, rides on us. Nobody loves us.”

The second brother was drafted to Southeast Asia and never returned. He belonged to a great number of dead Taiwanese soldiers (around 28,000) who were honored in the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, a shrine also honoring Japanese convicted war criminals and thus a symbol of Japanese militarism. Their identity was more complicated, because they fought for the Japanese army, died with other Japanese soldiers, but they were never treated as “real” Japanese soldiers. At least they were not compensated as equally as other Japanese soldiers. Furthermore, it is really inconceivable to have their memorial tablets sitting next to those of war criminals who were responsible for sending the innocent Taiwanese to war.

The third brother was also drafted by the Japanese military. He instead went to

Shanghai and other Chinese territories occupied by Japan (Manchuria, for example) and worked as a translator. After the Japanese were gone these actions made him an easy target for framing as a “Chinese traitor.” Tortured, he became half mad in the film; but, luckily or not, he was the only one who survived.

The fourth brother was a deaf-mute, symbolizing an average Taiwanese who could neither find the right language (Taiwanese? Mandarin? Japanese?) to use, nor express themselves. In one memorable scene, he was confronted by several mobs who demanded he speak Taiwanese or Japanese. This was the method to determine whether you were a Taiwanese or a mainland Chinese during the Feb. 28th Incident period. He panicked and could only, in an unrecognizable tone, utter: “I a-m a Tai-wan-ese,” which almost cost his life.

Postsadness cinema: the youth-nostalgia film

The above two scenes are epitomes of the ethos of sadness commonly found among Taiwan films prior to 1989. Since then, there is a consensus that we should “walk out of sadness” historically and culturally. Cinema was quick to grasp the spirit and started producing films totally different from the previous generation. One special genre, which is tentatively called the “youth-nostalgia” film, is the focus of this paper.

The forerunner of the youth-nostalgia genre films is *Blue Gate Crossing* (2002) by YEE Chih-Yen. The story is about the love-triangle relationship among three high-school students. Lin Yuezhen, a beautiful high-school girl, has a major crush on Zhang Shihao, a hunk and a member of both the guitar club and swimming team. She stalks Shihao around the campus and steals all kinds of things Shihao used, including his notebook, sports shoes, goggles, ball-point pen, etc., and hoards them as fetish items. Yuezhen once asks her tomboyish best friend, Meng Kerou, from whose perspective the story is presented, to wear a mask of Shihao’s face cutout and the two girls slow-dance while Yuezhen pretends she is dancing with her dream mate. She even begs Kerou to send a love letter to Shihao. And when Kerou reluctantly sends the letter, Shihao does not believe Yuezhen exists and becomes instead attracted to Kerou. To complicate their love-triangle structure, Kerou has her own agenda and is secretly in love with Yuezhen.

She believes it is wrong to have such a nascent lesbian impulses, so she resolves to write graffiti on a secret wall inside the gym: *I am a girl. I love boys.* — as if to remind her of her own sexual identity. She even dates Shihao and asks him to kiss her with the desperate hope that a kiss from a boy might cure her of her homosexuality. Though it does not work out, Shihao learns of her desire for Yuezhen and two of them become buddy-like friends. Finally Kerou steals a kiss from Yuezhen, who from then on pretends she does not know her any more. The film ends with Kerou and Shihao reflecting on the passing of summer and their future. Although Kerou’s future is unclear, her voice-over draws a sunny picture of her relationship with Shihao:

And I can see... years from now... you're in front of a blue gate, under the 3pm sun. You still have a few zits. You're smiling and I run to greet you. You nod.... Though I cannot see myself with eyes closed, I can see you.

The “blue gate” in the film title and here refers to their school gate and their transition from teen to adulthood. But most importantly for Kerou, it means that she can finally cross over and face her own same-sex desire. The film ends with them riding bicycles and passing through streets.



(Left: Kerou kissing Shihao; Right: Kerou kissing Yuezhen)

What distinguishes *Blue Gate Crossing* from previous coming-of-age narratives found in Taiwan cinema, if any, is its mixing of heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Moreover, its story is told from the point of view of the tomboy protagonist. Though puzzled and confused as the story unfolds, Kerou is courageous enough to express her lesbian love by kissing Yuezhen. There is no doubt that she is rejected by the latter, however, she has built up the confidence to deal with her sexual identification positively when the film ends. In this respect, the film can be read more or less as a lesbian “coming out” story, which is non-existent in the history of Taiwan cinema.

On the other hand, *Blue Gate Crossing* establishes several genre conventions for latter films to follow. The high school campus, for one, foregrounds as the main setting while high-schoolers become protagonists. In the past, a rigid examination system forced high school students to do nothing other than study hard, with the hope of entering better universities. Students in school were tightly controlled and monitored, as if inside a factory or prison, and school as a social institution was invisible to the public. The film title of “Blue Gate Crossing” thus indicates that audiences are finally allowed to move across the gate to look with affection at students as human beings. Even so, the milieu of school is segregated from social reality. The narrative is transcendental without any hint of political situation and historical memory of the time. The sadness ethos is here displaced by a different tone set through the love interests among students.

The most prominent prop in the film is a bicycle, ridden by all the three main characters. There is an interesting scene in which Kerou and Shihao compete, as in a fierce race, to ride faster than the other on a busy street. And after all misunderstandings are cleared, we see them riding together, with smiles and an easy mood, in an alley full of trees. The significance of the bicycle is that it replaces the train as the main vehicle for characters

to move around. In the past, trains played a major role in Taiwan cinema. It usually represents the protagonist's migration from a rural area to a city. It is also a symbol of modernization and Taiwan's economic success. Films from "Health Realism" period to New Taiwan Cinema movement all feature the passing of trains as an important transition. In *City of Sadness*, for example, the train was the only option for the fourth brother to escape from being captured by the military (but he and his family chose not to run away). We can also compare *Dust in the Wind* (1985) with *Blue Gate Crossing*. Both films are about high-school friendship, but in different spatial and temporal environments. One major scene in *Dust in the Wind* shows that two protagonists walk alongside the railway, whereas in *Blue Gate Crossing* two major characters always take bikes with them.



(Left: *Dust in the Wind*; Right: *Blue Gate Crossing*)

A Train, motored by a steam engine, breaks away limitations of time and distance imposed upon human bodies. As a marker of modernity, a train has to appear in almost every film before *Blue Gate Crossing*. On the contrary, human body movement powers the bicycle and determines how long and how far it can take us. Bicycles are therefore embedded with the sense of localness, while trains are trans-local. Their differences are an example of why youth-nostalgia films like this are void of larger political and historical implications.

The triangle relationships in *Blue Gate Crossing* also change the heterosexual pattern commonly found in coming-of-age stories. It is either two female friends competing to win the boy's heart, or vice versa. Here the homosexual angle is added. It might be the result of a promotional strategy to draw support from the gay community in Taiwan, helping the film to pull more than NTD 5 million (USD 170,000) at box office, second best of domestic production that year. Another diversion from regular love relationships in this film is that there is no sexual appeal exclusively for male or female. The only erotic scene happens between two girls as they hug and slow-dance. The kiss between Kerou and Shihao, more practical than intimate, does not count. It is as if they are looking for platonic love only, which might be attributed to the influence of Japanese "pure love" movies with the same narrative structure, such as *Love Letter* (1995) and *Pure Love Notes* (2000).

Unlike the previous two films, *Banana Paradise* and *City of Sadness*, *Blue Gate Crossing* does not end in a tragic way. It ends instead in a reminiscent atmosphere, when Kerou

imagines in her dreamy voice-over what will happen to them in a few years. Furthermore, nobody is actually hurt, except Yuezhen, who quickly turns her love interest from Shihao to a popular Japanese idol, Kimura Takuya. The global influence of Japanese pop culture is obviously an important element for *Blue Gate Crossing* and other youth-nostalgia films, which needs to be explored further as this genre evolves.

Filmic style of youth-nostalgic genre

In terms of visual style, *Blue Gate Crossing* shows a “deterritorialization” tendency as described above. Director YEE Chih-Yen said repeatedly that he felt Taipei is not very photogenic, with tall buildings everywhere. Thus, he no longer uses the trademark of Taiwan cinema since the 1980s — the long take and deep focus camera lens. This allows the landscape imagery in the shot to expand infinitely, providing the audience the chance to contemplate the relationship between man and environment, as in the last shot of *Dust in the Wind*, as well as the bird’s eye shot of Keelung harbor in *City of Sadness*. Yee decides to go against the grain to use shallow lens, combined with quick cuts to shorten the length of every single shot, resulting in the compression of characters and background environment. The scenery no longer has depth of field and so positions characters as if squeezed in an urban environment, as reflected in *Blue Gate Crossing*.



(left: *City of Sadness*; right: *Blue Gate Crossing*)

Similarly, the frame composition in *Blue Gate Crossing* is also different than that of Taiwan New Cinema. Films from Taiwan New Cinema movement often show a loose composition, and characters in the frame are not limited by the surrounding scenery, symbolizing freedom and openness. However, during some crucial moments, such an open space might result in an ironic effect. For example, at the end of *City of Sadness*, the fourth brother Wen Ching’s family attempted to avoid the hunt of the government, and was ready to flee by taking the train. Director Hou arranged to have three of them standing alone on the platform, surrounded by empty space, and endless expanse of the ocean behind them. When the train came and went, they did not get on it. Because, they understand, there is nowhere to run, where can they flee?



(left: *City of Sadness*; right: *Blue Gate Crossing*)

Blue Gate Crossing, on the other hand, uses a tight frame composition coupled with close-ups that not only limit the audience's perspective to simply watching characters in the scene, but also makes them no longer dependent on their geographical location. This deterritorialization effect of the relationship between characters and space has a deeper meaning: to isolate characters from the social and cultural background, and remove the historical and political significance of the social environment.

From *Eternal Summer* to *You Are the Apple of My Eye*

Based on the above analysis, *Blue Gate Crossing* laid down the filmic style of the youth nostalgia genre, and its influence continues today, including the 2011 hit *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, famously known as the 300% box-office return on investment. Between these two films, there is *Eternal Summer* (2006) that can be regarded as representing the turning point of the youth nostalgia genre. The gender composition of "Eternal Summer" changed from two female students and one male student in *Blue Gate Crossing* to two male students and one female. The homosexual element in this triangle relationship and the plot of confession still exist. Same as in *Blue Gate Crossing*, adults are all but absent and the three main characters live in their own world in *Eternal Summer*. Shou-heng and Chen-hsing were "mandatory friends" in elementary school, and kept telling each other "you are my best friend" after they grew up. In high school, Chia-hui joined the two. Just like her name, she disrupted the rotation of the two planets like a comet. Because of Chia-hui, Chen-hsing had to face his homosexuality. By secretly consulting books in the library and meeting with a homosexual man in an act of tantrum, Chen-hsing confirmed his homosexual tendencies. But he dared not confess to Shou-heng, just like Kerou in *Blue Gate Crossing*, afraid of losing his best friend if he told the truth. Only until the end of the film did he dare to ask Shou-heng, "Now that you know this secret, will you still want to be friends with me?"

Eternal Summer is more direct in dealing with same-sex desires than *Blue Gate Crossing*. The latter only had two girls embracing each other while dancing, and Kerou suddenly kissing Yuezhen. In *Eternal Summer*, there is an explicit sex scene between Shou-heng and Chen-hsing. Reception and commentary regarding this sex scene (and the plot development afterward) were opinionated. Why was Shou-heng instigating sexual relationship with Chen-hsing, but not vice versa? Between the two, who is "really" gay? And, at the end of the movie, why is it Chen-hsing who confessed to Shou-heng, "I think of you more than as a friend. I really like you"? To this study, sexual awakening and

openly facing homosexuality are keys to the narrative and also the dramatic tension of youth-nostalgia films.

Eternal Summer also brought out an important collective memory for Taiwanese in recent years, the September 21st earthquake that occurred in 1999. For the so-called "seventh grade" generation, those who were born after 1980, this earthquake is like one of their rites of passage for growing up, and the shock of it is very difficult to erase. Director Zheng-dao CHEN (born in 1981) established the pattern of representing the earthquake in *Eternal Summer*, which would be copied by later films. A most obvious follower is *You Are the Apple of My Eye*. The two movies have the same narrative mode listed below:

1. **(Indoor scene) Suddenly everything starts shaking.**
2. **Some people hid under the table.**
3. **A group of people run outdoors, talking and raising their cell phones high, trying to find the signal.**
4. **Ambulance rolls in.**
5. **The crowd gives way.**
6. **Main characters get in contact with each other.**
7. **Cut to the next scene.**

Interestingly, the camera position for the ambulance coming in is almost the same. Both films simultaneously choose high angle shot:



(Left: *Eternal Summer*; Right: *You Are the Apple of My Eye*)

You Are the Apple of My Eye is based on the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Giddens KO, who also directed the film. The film begins with a group of long-term friends attending the wedding of the girl they all love since their high school years. It then flashes back to 1994. Chia-yi Shen, an honor high school student and a popular girl all boys dying to date, is assigned by teacher to sit behind the mischievous Ching-teng Ko to keep her eyes on him. At first they don't see eye to eye, with Ching-teng's crass and juvenile act of public masturbation in the classroom and Chia-yi pushing him to study hard. Gradually, their relationship grows. But they never hold hands and never kiss, not even once. They do not have the first date until they go to university, though in different ones.

Ching-teng organizes a fight and invites Chia-yi to watch, as a way to show his strength (and perhaps, love) to her. However, this act backfires because Chia-yi thinks he is too childish and risk injuring himself for nothing, which causes a quarrel between them. They break up and lose contacts for a few years until the massive September 21st earthquake. Ching-teng manages to call her to make sure she is all right. Years later, Chia-yi calls Ching-teng about her marriage. All friends gather at the wedding, making jokes and reflecting on their good old happy days at high school. And Ching-teng becomes a web novelist, writing his experiences with Chia-yi and other friends, as the director Giddens does in real life.

In addition to the September 21st earthquake, there is another shared element that continues from *Blue Gate Crossing* to today: hope for the future. Characters of the younger generation in these films completely broke free from the previous generation of heavy historical “baggage.” They make no secret of their optimistic expectation and confidence for the future. In *Blue Gate Crossing*, for example, Shihao tells Kerou seriously, “If you start to like boys, you must tell me first.” In *Eternal Summer* Chia-hui says to Shou-heng, “In short, if you get into college, we will be together.” In *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, Ching-teng told Chia-yi in a very earnest tone, “After you go to college, don’t let guys get you too fast, OK?” In *Banana Paradise* when Latch cried to an elder who was not his father that “your son is unfilial,” as analyzed before, we believe that his feeling is genuine. Likewise, we must also believe that these young people are expressing their true feeling. They are finally no longer manipulated by the tragic fate of historical events, and their futures are in their own hands.

Walking out of sadness

The new generation is definitely not the same. They walk out of sadness, and make it so that today’s Taiwan cinema is no longer tragic, which is clearly expressed in the youth-nostalgic films examined in this paper, from *Blue Gate Crossing* to *You Are the Apple of My Eye*. Giddens Ko once defined the essence of *You Are the Apple of My Eye* as “passion plus youth,” and this is the hallmark of the youth-nostalgic genre. The passion embedded inside the film must have been spread like viral and infected the audience, especially the younger generation. It brings a frenzy to movie theaters across the Taiwan Strait, with Taiwan’s box office reaching almost half billion NTD, close to the highest grossing record set up by *Cape No. 7* for Taiwan cinema; Hong Kong breaking the record of box office champion *Kung Fu* by reaching \$60 million HKD; and China earning 76 million RMB.

However, one might add another keyword, immaturity (or stupidity), to describe the film. It is not about those stupid things Ko did in the film, nor about Ke acting like an immature boy at the end. It has to do with the Platonic love relationship between two protagonists. Nowadays, due to the open and sophisticated social relationship among people, it is hard to imagine that Ching-teng and Chia-yi DO NOT hold hands, not to mention having sex, from the day they met till Chia-yi married to another man, in a

lapse of more than 10 years. In any other romantic films from Taiwan and Hong Kong, sex has become a crucial narrative element, which truthfully reflects current situation when people having “relationship” or in love. Maybe it is exactly because of such an impossibly “pure” love represented in *You Are the Apple of My Eye* that draws audiences to watch and cherish it. After all, isn’t being immature a part of growing up?

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