

Film Appreciation

The Steady Rear Guard of Taiwanese Film Culture

James Udden

1983 was momentous for Taiwanese cinema. This was the first full year of the New Cinema movement in Taiwan, which saw the release of films such as the portmanteau work *The Sandwich Man*, which included the eponymous short by Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Edward Yang's feature-length masterpiece *That Day at the Beach*. In short order, this largely accidental movement would establish a permanent place for Taiwanese cinema in global film culture, creating a new film festival powerhouse by the end of the decade that would continue long thereafter.

The year 1983 was also marked by the first volume of a new film journal in Taiwan, *Film Appreciation* (電影欣賞), often referred to simply as *Fa*. Published by what was then officially the National Film Library—now the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute—in 2021, the journal published its 185th volume. The longevity of the journal in what has always been a volatile publishing climate—film publications tend to come and go—can be explained by two factors: first, *Film Appreciation* has always had the stable institutional backing of the publicly funded national archives from which it emanates; and, second, this journal has always functioned as a published extension of that same archive, thus avoiding being at the forefront of the heated debates and controversies regarding Taiwanese cinema. As such, *Film Appreciation* serves as a much-needed rear guard of Taiwanese film culture, an indispensable source, for scholars who read Chinese, for understanding Taiwanese cinema over the past four decades. To fully

appreciate this enduring cornerstone of Taiwan's film culture, we must explore not only what *Film Appreciation* is, but also what it is not.

WHAT *FILM APPRECIATION* IS NOT

There are three journals outside of Taiwan with which *Film Appreciation* should never be compared. This journal is categorically not Taiwan's version of *Cahiers du cinéma*, which began in France in 1951. This game-changing journal nurtured young critical talent such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, who throughout the 1950s mercilessly attacked certain "tendencies" in French cinema while systematically developing the auteur theory that would soon spread across the globe, even laying the foundation for the emergence of academic film studies. Moreover, these same critics would eventually put these ideas regarding authorship into practice as core members of the French New Wave by the end of the 1950s, creating a global "model" for every new cinema ever since, including Taiwan's.¹ *Film Appreciation* has nothing resembling *Cahiers du cinéma*'s theoretical breakthrough, the *politique des auteurs*, that it can take credit for. Moreover, while there were members of the New Cinema who began as critics, such as Chen Guofu, none began as an employee of *Film Appreciation*.

Given its semiofficial imprimatur, one might be tempted to see *Film Appreciation* as Taiwan's equivalent of film journals that emerged under the Italian fascists, such as *Cinema* (nominally edited by Vittorio Mussolini, the son of "Il Duce," Benito Mussolini), *Bianco e Nero*, or *Film*. It is true that technically Taiwan was still a fascist one-party state under the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Party in 1983, although there were already clear signs of burgeoning democracy and localization even at that early stage. Yet we should remember that, under Italian fascism, *Cinema* was publishing articles by leftist writers such as Cesare Zavattini, who would prove to be a central figure in postwar Italian neorealism.² Likewise, nothing in the pages of *Film Appreciation* had the lasting impact of Umberto Barbaro's 1943 article on Visconti's *Ossessione* in *Film*, which is often credited for attaching the term *neorealism* to a new trend in Italian filmmaking, another global model that persists to this day.³ *Fa* cannot claim to have coined an influential term describing a major film movement.

Even more surprising is how little *Film Appreciation* resembles Iran's *Film International*, which began in 1993. The parallels between Iranian and Taiwanese cinema are almost uncanny, but not when it comes to film journals. They were the birthplaces of two of the most distinctive "festival powerhouses" in the past few decades, and both followed almost identical tracks into the festival realm starting in the mid-1980s. Both cinemas originate from pariah states, albeit for very different reasons. Both places also stood to gain a great deal from any form of cultural dialogue, since they are arguably two of the most misunderstood places on the planet. Yet, in what is undoubtedly a much more difficult political climate, only Iran has a brash English-language vehicle for the rest of the world to read. Taiwan does not.

Film International is the English-language scion of the most significant film journal in Iran, *Mahndmeh-ye sinema'i-ye film* (*Film Monthly*). This Farsi-language progenitor was born in arguably even more difficult circumstances, having published its first issue in June 1981, when it was still far from clear what sort of cinema would be allowed in Iran. What is most surprising about *Film International* as the English-language counterpart is how much it airs all the “dirty laundry” of domestic issues regarding its cinema to the rest of the world. This includes detailed reports on films unknown outside of Iran that were highly controversial within Iran, continual reports of the failings of government policies regarding issues such as decrepit film theaters, and other articles often touting Iran’s festival success even when such successes were not always welcomed by the clerical regime in Iran. This journal even used the term *McCarthyism* to describe the cultural policies of the mid-1990s.⁴

There is little of the English language to be found in *Film Appreciation* aside from abstracts and some of the wording of Kodak ads found consistently on its back covers. *Film Appreciation* does not even strive for a wide readership in mainland China, since it is published only in traditional Chinese characters, not simplified. (However, one can presume that better-educated readers on the mainland can handle traditional characters.) To wit, *Film Appreciation* is strictly for domestic consumption, bringing the entire gamut of world cinema to Taiwan, not Taiwanese cinema to the rest of the world.

Even within Taiwan, however, the editorial stance of *Film Appreciation* has historically been one of reticence. Since the 1980s the debates about Taiwanese cinema have been combative, even bitter at times. Yet the role of *Film Appreciation* has often been to monitor these debates rather than engender or inflame them. We can attribute this restraint to the genesis of the journal itself, since it originates from a government-run film archive.

The Film Library was operated initially by the KMT, which by the 1980s was treading on very uncertain ground after the Republic of China lost the recognition of the US government in 1979. The initial head of the Film Library was a KMT bureaucrat, Xu Ligong, who back then knew nothing about cinema. Yet, according to a later director of the film archive, Edmond Wong (who as a young critic defended the New Cinema movement in the 1980s), Xu Ligong wisely listened to young people who did know better. He did not dictate.⁵ *Film Appreciation* was born in that climate.

For the most part, the debates themselves have centered around the political economy underpinning Taiwanese cinema. One central concern was the role of the KMT itself, which for decades had set the terms for Taiwanese cinema through censorship, government policies, and the guiding hand of the Central Motion Picture Company (CMPC). The CMPC was the leading studio in Taiwan for decades, operated directly by the Party. It often steered the direction not only of the more propagandistic fare in Taiwan but commercial trends as well. The New Cinema brought this issue to a head, since one of the defining features of the movement

was its subtle suggestions that Taiwan was something distinct from China proper, even if these were never calls for outright Taiwanese independence. This went against the grain of how the KMT had justified ruling Taiwan since 1949. The culmination of these debates came with the triumph of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness* in 1989, which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and enjoyed record-breaking box office success at home.

Yet the debates about Taiwanese cinema were never purely political; they were always as much about economics. Indeed, this became the more lasting debate, since once Taiwan democratized in the 1990s, the role of the KMT Party became less of an issue. This all stems from the severe economic crisis facing the Taiwanese film industry by the 1980s. It was the result of long-term policies that had favored Hong Kong films over local productions in Taiwan's market. It was also due to the CMPC now being on the verge of bankruptcy after a series of big-budget propaganda films designed to shore up the KMT's image after the loss of US recognition, a trend which simply proved to be unsustainable.

As a result, even before the emergence of the New Cinema and *Film Appreciation*, these issues were being addressed in daily publications in Taiwan. Most notable was a section called "Cinema Plaza" in the *United Daily News*, overseen by Peggy Chiao, now a famed writer, educator, and producer in Taiwan. Chiao's role was somewhat similar to Andre Bazin's in France in the 1950s, in that she was nurturing younger critics such as Chen Guofu, who would later become a director himself. These young critics were difficult to control, Chiao said, and merciless in their attacks on the flagging film industry. Before long, "Cinema Plaza" was closed down due to pressure on the newspaper from industry figures.⁶

The New Cinema was the unexpected byproduct of this crisis, and before long it became the convenient target for those casting blame about the sorry state of Taiwanese cinema. When it became clear by 1984 that the movement was not going to be the economic savior of the industry—something it was never designed to be to begin with—the New Cinema became the object of numerous attacks, deflecting blame from the actual failings of both the industry and the KMT that had led Taiwanese cinema to its lowly state. Once again, however, the heated debates occurred in the dailies, not in the pages of *Film Appreciation*. Even when a writer at *Fa* joined the fray, however, he found himself on the "wrong side" of these debates in retrospect. Liang Liang in 1985 published a multipart series in the journal called "A Preliminary Investigation into the Film Market." In part 5, he directly accused Hou Hsiao-hsien of indulging in his long-take style with little concern for either the story line or the audience, resulting in box office failures at home despite the festival accolades.⁷

Others were less willing to let the government itself off the hook, refusing to join this "Anti-Hou" (i.e., "Anti-New Cinema") faction. This included some short-lived film journals in the 1980s such as *400 Blows* and *Long Take*. One notable example in the latter is a scathing 1987 article by Edward Yang: after winning the

Silver Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival, Yang blasted the KMT government for how poorly Taiwanese cinema was represented at film festivals compared to other nations.⁸ In the same year, nearly every member of the movement and numerous critics published a joint declaration calling for the KMT government to clarify its film policies, since it never made clear where it truly stood on the cultural/commercial divide. Once again, however, this was published in most of the major newspapers in Taiwan, not in *Film Appreciation*. (To be perfectly fair, it was also published in the 1988 annual yearbook also published by the National Film Archives.)⁹ A decade later, similar debates occurred over the *fudaojin*, the government's Assistance and Guidance Grant program for cinema that began in 1989. Once again, the raging polemics were to be found mostly in the daily press, such as *Dacheng Bao*¹⁰ and *Ziyou Shibao*.¹¹

There are even ways to numerically measure how much *Film Appreciation* was not at the front lines of the debates surrounding Taiwanese cinema: published anthologies. In 1988, Peggy Chiao edited a 430-plus-page anthology of articles and critical reviews from the 1980s about the New Cinema, which even included translations of reviews by the likes of Tony Rayns and J. Hoberman. This is the definitive collection of mostly Taiwanese writings when the movement was in its heyday. However, of the seventy-six items included in that volume, only two originated from *Film Appreciation*.¹² The most famous polemical volume came out in 1991 after the debates aroused by Hou's *City of Sadness*. Edited by Mi Zo and Liang Xinhua, *Death of the New Cinema* is a collection of thirty-three articles from 1987 to 1990. While it does include five works that originated from *Film Appreciation*, over a dozen of its selections are from a single newspaper in Taiwan, *The Independent Morning Post* (自立早報), a brash new journalistic voice that emerged in 1988 after the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. True to form, *Film Appreciation* was not dominating the conversation regarding Taiwanese cinema even when participating.

THE INSTITUTIONAL BACKDROP

To fully appreciate what *Film Appreciation* is (and not just what it is *not*) begins with understanding its institutional basis. This journal has always been published by a publicly funded film archive/library that has borne several different names over the years. In every issue, in fact, under the listing of the editorial staff is a listing of the staff of the entire archives as well. In 1975, the Government Information Office (GIO), which oversaw all film policies in Taiwan, formed the Motion Picture Development Foundation with the Taipei Film Business Association. In January 1979, the Film Library of this foundation was opened in Taipei and was funded by the GIO. The name of this body has changed over the years, becoming the National Film Archive in 1989, the Chinese Taipei Film Archives in 1995 (although its name in Chinese remained unchanged), then the Taiwan Film Institute in 2014,

and finally the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (TFAI), which it has been known as since 2020. In 1991, this archive became its own foundation administered by the GIO. With the latest change, however, it is now its own administrative body.

Over the years, this single institution, the TFAI, was by far the most indispensable for my own research on Taiwanese cinema, carrying a collection of more than seventeen thousand film titles and nearly every film journal and newspaper article ever written about cinema in Taiwan. I have spoken with three different directors of this archive over the years: Edmond Wong, when I first explored the archive as a graduate student in the late 1990s applying for a Fulbright scholarship; Winston Lee, who was director when I did the Fulbright in 2000–01 (and later when I returned in 2005 for more research); and Zhang Qinpei, director when I returned for another research trip in late 2012. Edmond Wong and Zhang Qinpei were both notable critics in Taiwan before taking on this position; Winston Lee, on the other hand, was a government bureaucrat who had worked in the Film Office of the GIO in the early 1980s. Yet even Lee recounted a recurring nightmare for all three directors of the TFAI: it is always at the mercy of government coffers and those higher up who might suddenly question the value of subsidizing Taiwanese film culture.¹³

Yet, to date, these fears have never materialized. Moreover, this is a real plus for its flagship journal, *Film Appreciation*, since it does not have to rely on advertising to survive. The only exception was the back covers of *Fa*, which over the years had full-page color ads from Kodak. In the summer 2012 edition (no. 151), for example, there is an image of famed Taiwanese cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bing, with a quote in English: “HD doesn’t hold the kind of fascination to me.”¹⁴ Otherwise, the only ads within the journal are mostly for various retrospectives and film festivals across the island and books published by the archives.

This is in stark contrast to another journal I recall from the 1990s named *Influence*. While living in Taiwan before I went to graduate school, I once mistakenly assumed this was the leading film journal in Taiwan due to its slick covers, its name’s clever pun in Chinese, and its prominence as the most visible of all the film journals in Taiwanese bookstores at the time. Looking back at the issues still in my possession highlights how many ads lie within, everything from Chrysler cars to Kirin Beer. By the 2000s, however, this journal ceased to exist.

There is another built-in advantage for *Film Appreciation*: memberships. The TFAI is not dependent solely on taxpayers’ money but also on membership dues. Every time I went to Taiwan for research at the archives (2000–01, 2005, 2012), I would apply for either a six-month or a yearlong membership to the archive and then would have access to all the films and publications in its collection. The prices were very reasonable, around US\$30 for six months. Moreover, the archive always seemed to be used by numerous people every day—scholars, graduate students, and, presumably, industry figures and critics. While you are a member, you also receive every issue of *Film Appreciation* published during that period, which is how I came to be in possession of most of the fourteen volumes I still own. In two

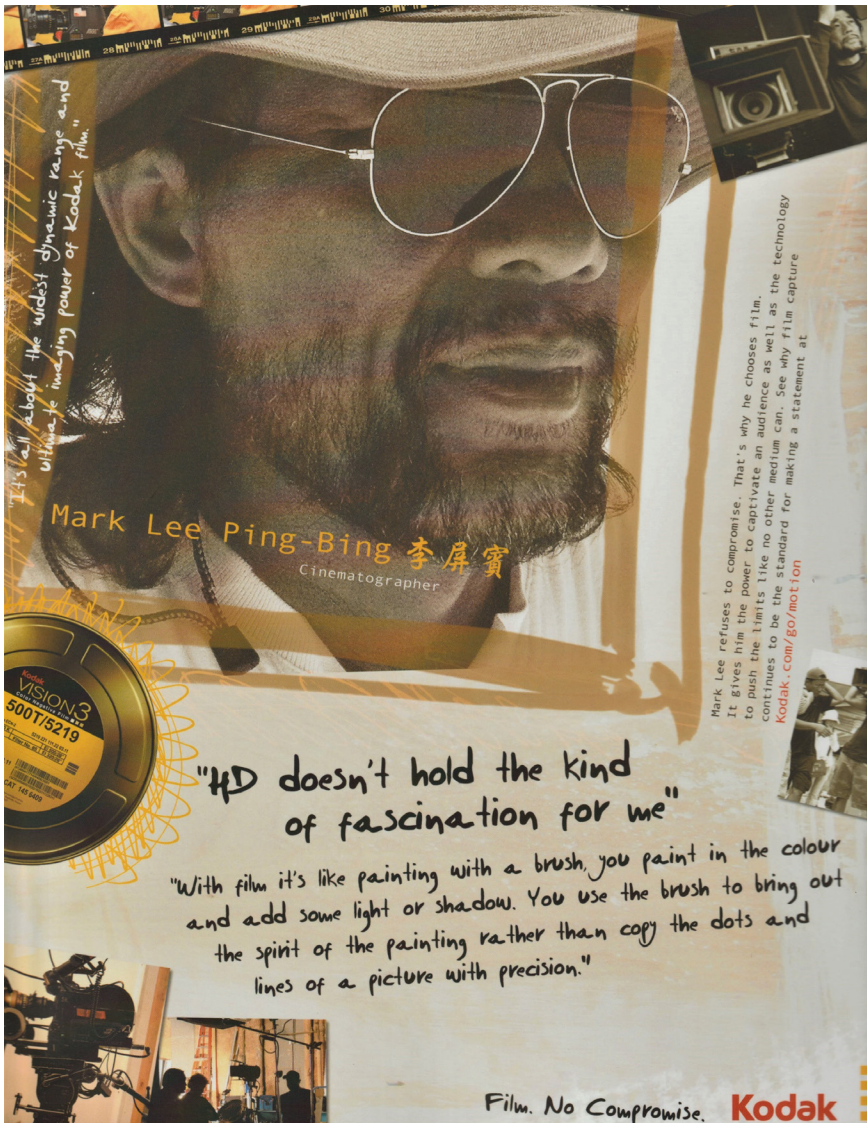


FIGURE 12.1. Kodak ad featuring cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bing, back cover of *Fa* issue 151, 2012.

cases I was not going to remain in Taiwan for six months, so they gave me some back issues just to be fair.

Despite the complaints of those working there, my sense has always been that this archive/film library is well funded as a result of steady membership dues in addition to government funding. The extent of other publishing done at the

Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute supports this; not only does the TFAI publish *Film Appreciation* (albeit now on a quarterly, not monthly basis), they have also published several books on a wide range of topics, plus their impressive annual yearbooks, the most indispensable source for my research over the years (I currently own twenty-two volumes of these yearbooks dating back to 1990).

The annual yearbooks are important for another reason. *Film Appreciation* operates seemingly in tandem with the yearbooks despite having different editors. The yearbooks are excellent sources for detailed information about the film industry and for summarizing the major issues of that year, compiling the most representative articles from various publications elsewhere. This frees *Film Appreciation* to explore whatever topics it may desire. What *Fa* seems to desire is to cover just about everything under the sun.

THE LAYOUT

The archival tenor of *Film Appreciation* is revealed through the lack of strong editorial statements—or oftentimes no editorial statements whatsoever. The majority of the editions of *Fa* that I own lack any foreword by any editor. When *Fa* does include them, they are not from the executive editor, but rather the editor-in-chief, who is also the head of the archives. Edmond Wong usually did not have a written statement, but in the January–February 1997 edition, he was compelled to respond to the recent deaths of two notable Chinese directors, Li Han-hsiang and King Hu, speculating about what the future would hold in a time of change.¹⁵ Winston Lee seemingly avoided editorial statements altogether, based on my sample issues. Only Zhang Qinpei would open most of the editions during her tenure, but these are mainly introductions to the special topics being discussed in that issue. To this day, the heads of the archive seemingly have continued the tradition of its original head, Xu Ligong: be open, listen, and do not dictate.

The actual layout of the journal over the years has always depended on who is the executive editor of the journal itself, not the head of the archive. The newest editions I possess date from 2012 (nos. 151 and 152) and list Lin Yingzhi (林盈志) as executive editor. Both emphasize a single theme or two for that issue. Issue 151 is a collection of every conceivable article about King Hu to accompany a retrospective of his work at the archives, divided into three sections organized around three of his films.¹⁶ The next issue focuses on key figures in the history of Taiwanese cinema such as Ming Ji (明驥—famed head of the CMPC who is often called the father of the New Cinema) and the star Zhang Meiyao (張美瑤).¹⁷

It is more common, however, for any issue of *Film Appreciation* to be more varied and less local. When I published an article in *Fa* in the 2000s, the editor I dealt with directly was Jady Long (龍傑娣). One striking change under her tenure was on the covers: a subtle alteration of the English acronym from *FA* to *Fa*, which continues to the present day. Another visual change on the covers is



FIGURE 12.2. Streamlined front cover design for *Fa* issue 120, 2004.

captivating minimalist artworks original for each issue, with almost no linguistic encumbrances aside from the names and issue numbers on the righthand edge. More important, of course, are the contents within.

Long tended to break every issue into several sections. Usually, the first section was a special topic explored in depth with roughly three to five articles by several writers from anywhere. These topics could be a filmmaker such as Takeshi

Kitano, Wong Kar-wai,¹⁸ or Alexandr Sokurov,¹⁹ or other sundry topics such as “What Is Chinese-Language Film Studies?”²⁰ “8mm Cinema in the 21st Century,”²¹ “Debates on Taiwanese Documentaries,”²² or “Cinema and Video Games.”²³ Usually, this section was followed by interviews of various key figures (including some translations from other languages), followed by other sections such as 新感官世介, which can be (very) roughly translated as “New Perspectives on the World” but is so broadly amorphous that it could include just about anything.

To show how wide a net *Film Appreciation* casts, around 2004 the journal began to ask a team of Taiwanese academics to edit a section devoted to more academic writings (學術版). Sometimes this section has been published separately from the regular journal. I was a direct beneficiary of this change, since one of the first articles I had ever published in English about Hou Hsiao-hsien was later translated into traditional Chinese characters and published in issue 124 of *Fa* in 2005.²⁴ To translate articles originally written in other languages is common practice at *Fa*, and unsurprisingly so. While the audience is decidedly local, even specialized, since it is primarily aimed at the more educated membership of the TFAI (Edmond Wong in his 1997 foreword addressed “members,” not “readers”), the goal is to provide everyone in the Taiwanese film world—critics, scholars, students, filmmakers, industry figures, and more—a global perspective on cinema everywhere.

CONCLUSION

The former home page of the website for *Film Appreciation* included an English statement (a rarity) that contained this sentence: “With an average of 100,000 words per issue, the Journal is now a film archive of more than 15 million words and over 2,000 articles.”²⁵ The use of the word *archive* is telling because that is what most defines this journal, the child of the government-funded-and-operated film archive in Taiwan since 1983. To take pride in sheer volume over any singular voice or vision is precisely what this journal is meant to do: to have not a voice, but “voices”; not a vision, but “visions” from every place and every time.

Since the 1980s, Taiwanese film culture has often been a heated battleground, and other film journals have come and gone. *Film Appreciation*, on the other hand, is a true survivor, a much-needed rear guard of film culture that has attempted to cover every topic of interest to the local film world over time and leave it for posterity. When the battles were most vehement over the New Cinema, *Fa* was more muted; when those passions had cooled, they would offer more in-depth retrospection. The goal of the journal is that of the archive within which it resides: to neither privilege nor preclude, to deem much as worthy of preservation, and in every case to provide some focus in due time. *Film Appreciation* may not have been a game-changer or a definer of sweeping debates, but it was and still is a necessity.

NOTES

1. For more background, see Emilie Bickerton, *A Short History of Cahiers du Cinéma* (London: Verso, 2009).
2. Tag Gallagher, "NR = MC2: Rossellini, 'Neorealism' and Croce," *Film History* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 87–97.
3. A good overview of the complicated origins and meanings of the term *neorealism* can be found in chapter 1 of Charles Leavitt, *Italian Neorealism: A Cultural History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).
4. James Udden, "The Other *Film International*: Iran's Journalistic Window in World Film Culture," *Film International* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 96–105.
5. Edmond Wong in discussion with the author, Taipei, Taiwan, May 3, 2001.
6. Peggy Chiao in discussion with the author, Middleton, Wisconsin, March 10, 2002.
7. Liang Liang, "Daingying Shichangxue Chutan [wu] [A Preliminary Investigation into the Film Market, Pt. 5]," *Film Appreciation* 3, no. 2 (July 1985): 42–43.
8. Edward Yang, "Women shi godu de malasong changpao xuanshou [We Are Lonely Runners on a Marathon]," *Long Take*, no. 3 (October 1987): 17–19.
9. "Minguo qishiliunian Taiwan dianying xuanyan [1987 Declaration on Taiwanese Cinema]," *Cinema in the Republic of China Yearbook, 1988* (Taipei: National Film Archives, 1988): 37–38.
10. See Xian Ru, "Fudaojin Zhengyi: 2100 shuofenming [2100 Opinions in Debate over the Fudaojin]," *Dacheng Bao*, July 30, 1998, 2.
11. See Fan Qionghen, "Dianying chuangzuo lianmeng lizheng guopian fudaojin [Film Creative League Debates the Fudaojin]," *Ziyou shibao*, July 21, 1998, 30; Zhong Mingfei, "Taiwan dianying zai haian zhong manwu [Taiwanese Cinema Is a Dancer in the Dark]," *Ziyou shibao*, September 25, 2001, 29; Zhu Yanping, "Fudaojin de misi: Baole tangyi de duyao [Confusion about the Fudaojin: Sugar-Coated Poison]," *Ziyou shibao*, December 6, 2001, 22.
12. Peggy Chiao, *Taiwan xin dianying [Taiwan's New Cinema]* (Taipei: China Times Publications, 1988).
13. Winston Lee in discussion with the author, Taipei, Taiwan, December 2012.
14. In December 2012, I was on set for Hou's *The Assassin* when Lee said this more pointedly in Chinese: "Being asked to use digital is like being asked to paint with a ballpoint pen."
15. Edmond Wong, "Biajishi baogao [A Report from the Editorial Room]," *Film Appreciation* 85 (January–February 1997): 2–3.
16. "Hu Jinchuan (King Hu)," *Film Appreciation* 151 (Summer 2012).
17. "Zuizhen—Ming Ji: huainian Tiwan xin dianying zhi fu [Most Real—Ming Ji: Remembering the Father of Taiwan's New Cinema]" and "Zuimei—Zhang Meiyao: Huainian Taiwan diyi meinu [Most Beautiful—Zhang Meiyao: Remembering Taiwan's First Beauty]," *Film Appreciation* 152 (Autumn 2012).
18. "Bei ye wu yu Wang Jiwei de yingxian shijian [The Incidental Imagery of Taekshhi Kitano and Wong Kar-wai]," *Film Appreciation* 102 (December 1999–February 2000): 13–46.
19. "Sogunuofu: xianweiqiepan (Sokourov)," *Film Appreciation* 103 (March–May 2000): 19–40.
20. "Sheme shi zhongwen dianying yanjiu? [What Is Chinese-Language Film Studies?]," *Film Appreciation* 104 (June–August 2000): 11–47; "Sheme shi zhongwen dianying yanjiu? (*Xubian*) [What Is Chinese-Language Film Studies? (*Cont.*)]," *Film Appreciation* 105 (September–November 2000): 14–43.
21. "Yingge waiyan: xinshiji balimi dianying [Outside the Frame: 8mm Cinema in the 21st Century]," *Film Appreciation* 106 (January–March 2001): 12–57.
22. "Taiwan jilupian luntan [Debates on Taiwanese Cinema]," *Film Appreciation* 111 (April–June 2002): 11–34.
23. "Dianying yu dianwan [Cinema and Video Games]," *Film Appreciation* 120 (July–September 2004): 7–37.

24. James Udden, "Hou Xiaoxian yu Zhongguo gengge wenti [Hou Hsiao-hsien and the Question of a Chinese Style]," *Film Appreciation* 124 (June–September 2005): 44–53.

25. For current information about the Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute, which publishes *Film Appreciation*, see <https://www.tfai.org.tw/en/page/about-research.html>.

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