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### The absent father of Sino-French cinema: contemporary Taiwanese cinema and 1950s French auteurs

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## The absent father of Sino-French cinema: contemporary Taiwanese cinema and 1950s French auteurs

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In contemporary Sino-French cinema, father characters who are dead, long lost or geographically distant leave gaping holes in the lives of the offspring left behind. The absent fathers in Sino-French films by Taiwanese auteurs Cheng Yu-chieh, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang serve as metaphors for French auteurs. French New Wave films constitute the majority of the intertexts; however, early 1950s French cinema and even late nineteenth-century painting reflect the expansiveness of French influence. Despite the possibility of an orientalist dynamic, Taiwanese auteurs not only pay homage to their French 'fathers', and especially New Waver François Truffaut, but also strike out on their own, contributing innovative work to contemporary transnational cinemas.

**Keywords:** Cheng Yu-chieh; Hou Hsiao-hsien; Tsai Ming-liang; François Truffaut; Albert Lamorisse; French New Wave

Fathers are conspicuously absent from the contemporary 'Sino-French'<sup>1</sup> films of Taiwanese directors Cheng Yu-chieh, Hou Hsiao-hsien and their compatriot by adoption, Malaysian-born Chinese Tsai Ming-liang.<sup>2</sup> Whether dead, long lost or geographically distant, fathers leave gaping holes in the lives of the family members they leave behind. These patriarchs may be out of the picture, figuratively, but they are paradoxically present by virtue of their absence. They are not only referred to in dialogue, but also represented through their images, voices or even signatures. These absent fathers represent French cinema and particularly 1950s films. The French auteurs who serve as the 'cinematic fathers' of the contemporary Taiwanese directors are especially but not exclusively New Wave directors, with an emphasis on François Truffaut. French cinema permeates Taiwanese-helmed films as varied as Cheng's *Yang-Yang* (2009), Hou's *Le Voyage du ballon rouge* (*Flight of the Red Balloon*, 2007) and Tsai's *Ni na bian ji dian* (*What Time is it There?*, 2001). In these films, the representation and circulation of the ghostly patriarch<sup>3</sup> troubles and destabilizes abandoned family members while representing and facilitating the spatiotemporal circulation between 2000s Taipei and 1950s Paris. By infusing their films with French cinema and language, Taiwanese directors do not simply resuscitate the French New Wave, but reshape it in order to create their own cinema, with a French twist. Taiwanese auteurs stake out their place in international film and culture by invoking the French 'masters'.<sup>4</sup> The French in turn reach out to Taiwanese directors in order to enrich their own patrimony, in mutually beneficial gestures contributing to transnational cinema.

In the background of the connections between the French New Wave and contemporary Taiwanese cinema lies the pre-eminence of France in world film throughout its history, by contrast with the low profile of the Taiwanese film industry. Consequently, in order to

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remain viable, Taiwan has had reason to stake its place on the international scene, led by France, arguably the birthplace of the ‘seventh art’ with the Lumière brothers’ projection of the first films at the Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895 (Lanzoni 2002, 29). The prestigious Cannes Film Festival epitomizes France’s leading position in global cinema. Since the birth of film, the French government, which has long supported the arts, has been committed to funding the work not only of its own directors but also of auteurs from other countries, including those suffering from a dearth of funding opportunities at home. The Fonds Sud Cinéma, a key French organization lending support, was funded by the Ministry of Foreign and European Culture. From 1984 to 2011, the Fonds Sud sponsored features by directors from ‘Third World’ countries.<sup>5</sup> Replacing the Fonds Sud in 2012, the World Cinema Support (Aide aux cinémas du monde) broadened the geographic scope of eligibility, opening up to directors from any country other than France, with the caveat of French co-production.<sup>6</sup> That said, directors from ‘low-income countries’ may receive funding for a higher percentage of the budget.<sup>7</sup> Although neither Taiwan nor China qualifies for this need-based benefit, numerous mainland directors have been funded thus far and their Taiwanese counterparts may follow suit.

Although Taiwan is by no means economically disadvantaged, a series of blights on its film industry throughout its history motivated its directors to collaborate internationally, with the French in particular, though by no means exclusively. Both the Japanese colonization and the subsequent (post-1945) nationalist Kuomintang fostered propaganda film, including made-for-theatre newsreels, anti-communist documentaries and war films of the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC) (Neri 2009, 55). Jumping ahead, in the late 1970s, Taiwanese cinema entered a crisis due to competition with international (primarily Hollywood) film as well as television and video, among other things (Neri 2009, 55). In the face of this chequered history, it is no surprise that Taiwanese directors such as Tsai have more recently welcomed opportunities for French support, beginning with *The Hole* (Dong, 1998), and continuing throughout most of his subsequent works.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, Shu-mei Shih stated that the ‘local film market’ in Taiwan was ‘dead’ and thus arthouse filmmakers such as Hou, Edward Yang and Tsai benefited from French and Japanese funding (2007, 118). Although the box office success of Wei Te-sheng’s *Cape 7* (*Hai jiao qi hao*) in 2008 was a major breakthrough, it also signalled the expected marketability of mainstream films as opposed to arthouse films such as those of Hou and Tsai.

It is precisely because of the ‘commercial’ versus ‘artistic’ distinction that the juxtaposition of *Yang-Yang* with *What Time?* and *Flight* may be surprising. However, Cheng’s oeuvre is not purely commercial. More importantly, *Yang-Yang* in particular interrogates the dichotomy between mainstream and arthouse cinema. Unlike Tsai and Hou, who lie at the end of the auteur/mainstream spectrum, Cheng occupies a liminal position. Supported by Khan Lee’s ‘Pushing Hands Project’, named after his brother Ang’s 1992 film, *Yang-Yang* caters to the project’s mainstream target audience:

Khan specifically pointed out the goal of the project was to support films with mainstream appeal; therefore, he preferred a script not only with a good story but also with a well-developed narrative structure. Cheng’s last film *Do Over* has been criticized as too artistic for the general audience, so he tried to make his second feature a crowd pleaser. With this consensus, they decided to work together. (*Press Kit for Yang-Yang* 2009, 11)

Satisfying Khan Lee’s call by shifting from the more arthouse ilk of Cheng’s debut feature, *Yi nian zhi chu* (*Do Over*, 2006), *Yang-Yang* significantly testifies that the Sino-French is not limited to arthouse film. A rich and complex case, *Yang-Yang* has screened

widely at film festivals, opening at the Taiwan International Film Festival in 2009, but also appearing at other prestigious festivals such as Berlin and Pusan, among many others ([http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1363490/releaseinfo?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_dt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1363490/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_dt_dt)). *Yang-Yang* also refers implicitly to French New Wave precedents. Furthermore, long before making *Yang-Yang*, Cheng stated that the work of Taiwanese auteur Edward Yang, in addition to Hou and Tsai's *What Time?*, influenced him (Kokas 2006). The subtlety of *Yang-Yang*'s French New Wave intertexts no doubt stems from the mainstream bent of 'Pushing Hands', as intertextuality, and particularly references to auteur films and other high art texts, tends to be more prevalent in arthouse film.

In *Yang-Yang*, Cheng represents the coming together of Taiwan and France in both body and text. Of Franco-Taiwanese parentage, like the actress Sandrine Pinna (Zhang Rong-Rong) who plays her, the approximately 20-year-old 'métisse' or mixed race character Yang-Yang embodies Franco-Taiwanese-ness. Her racial hybridity provokes ceaseless comments and questions. Yang-Yang's biological father, whom she does not know or remember, is presumably French, but she does not speak the language nor is she interested in learning, even when oral proficiency is an expectation of her work as an actress. Yang-Yang resists French due to her father's abandonment and because she is visibly different from other Taiwanese. Ironically, as a result of her resistance to France and the French language, they permeate the film. Indeed, *Yang-Yang* suggests that Taiwanese cinema cannot avoid France and its cinema. France occupies a significant place in the Taiwanese imagination, although a more elitist one than the United States. Paris is often equated with France while myths, stereotypes and Sinophone cinema tend to ignore the country beyond its capital. Paris and France have an undeniable and particular 'je ne sais quoi'. Both evoke sophistication and sexiness, cuisine and fashion and symbolize 'culture, art, even immortality' (Lin, Jiann-Guang, Email, July 30). Feeding into such stereotypes, Yang-Yang is beautiful and exploits her appearance in her film and television acting.

Through diegetic elements more than cinematic techniques, Cheng gestures back to the aesthetically revolutionary French New Wave (*nouvelle vague*) of 1959–64, with Yang-Yang nodding to Godard and his debut feature, *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), but more strongly connecting with Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959). In a compelling comparison that may be surprising due to differences in gender and age, the protagonist of *Yang-Yang*, the eponymous twenty-something Eurasian track runner turned actress and model, recalls Truffaut's endearing troublemaker protagonist of *The 400 Blows*. Furthermore, the last scene of Cheng's film echoes Truffaut's famous final sequence.

Yang-Yang's trajectory recalls Antoine Doinel's path. Doinel and the 1950s Paris that Truffaut depicts are both visions of 'pure whiteness' rather than the multicultural France seen in films by more recent Francophone filmmakers such as Mathieu Kassovitz and Abdellatif Kechiche.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Antoine and Yang-Yang both suffer from parental lacunae. Like Yang-Yang, Antoine never knew his biological father; he, too, has a stepfather, while his mother is neglectful. Antoine's illegitimacy offers a parallel to Yang-Yang's métissage, or mixed race, if we invoke Maryse Condé's parallel between it and 'bâtardise' (bastardy). According to Condé, although 'bâtardise' has stronger negative connotations than métissage, both entail the 'alteration of nature and culture' and 'impurity' (1999, 212).

Antoine and Yang-Yang are both unwitting, well-intentioned troublemakers. Truffaut's protagonist lives up to the film's original French title, which comes from the expression 'faire les 400 coups' or 'to raise hell' (Insdorf [1979] 1994, 173). Antoine lies (saying his mother is dead to explain his truancy) and steals (a typewriter), whereas Yang-Yang cheats (having sex with her sister's boyfriend, Shawn). Although a flawed

character like Antoine, Yang-Yang is construed as more ill-intentioned than she is. Yang-Yang's sister, Xiao-Ru, frames her for using performance-enhancing drugs in a race, leading to her shaming the family. Guilty of the sexual betrayal, Yang-Yang does not affirm her innocence of the other crime. Shawn is attracted to Yang-Yang; the desire proves mutual, prompting Yang-Yang to propose a secret, one-time sexual encounter. However, the enamoured young man does not keep his begrudging promise to pretend it never happened. When Shawn calls Yang-Yang, Xiao-Ru picks up her sister's phone, thus hearing the words intended for his lover. Also guilty of wrongdoing, Antoine is similarly falsely accused. In a metaphor for cinematic intertextuality as homage rather than copying, Antoine's homage to Balzac in the form of an essay inspired by his reading of a novel by the nineteenth-century author comes close enough to the original to be taken for plagiarism. However, Antoine clearly serves as Truffaut's mouthpiece for affirming respect and admiration for the work of fellow artists through intertextuality; the director is condemning 1950s French education while implicitly praising the practice of intertextuality. Both Antoine and Yang-Yang also encounter official authority figures and then leave home. Ironically, the boy gets caught returning the typewriter he has stolen from his stepfather's office, prompting the latter to escort him to the police station, where he is arrested. At their wit's end, Antoine's mother and stepfather send him to an observation centre for juvenile delinquents. Also following an unpleasant encounter with authorities (agents who test her blood for drugs), Yang-Yang takes it upon herself to leave home. Although trying modelling and acting is positive, her departure results from no less negative circumstances than Antoine's.

*Yang-Yang's* last scene harks back to the French New Wave, and particularly the famous final sequences of both *The 400 Blows* and *Breathless*. Whereas Antoine escapes from the observation centre, Yang-Yang runs away from her agent Ming-Ren and her difficult experience shooting the last scene of the film-within-the-film, in which she plays a character so closely based on herself that it is painful. Yang-Yang's final flight from the pain provoked by the absence of her father, mirrored in the situation of her character in the film shoot, echoes the scene in which Antoine jogs toward the *mer* (sea) (Figure 1). In French, *la mer* is a homonym for *mère* (mother), reflecting the liberation he feels upon satisfying his dream of seeing the sea. The ocean represents the maternal, which he has long craved, as seen in the earlier shot of him gulping an entire bottle of milk when he has run away from home. By contrast with Yang-Yang, who also has a stepfather and a



Figure 1. Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre L  aud) jogging toward the sea in *The 400 Blows*.



Figure 2. Yang-Yang (Sandrine Pinna) in the solo running finale of *Yang-Yang*.

biological mother, Antoine never benefits from satisfying maternal love. In both films, the shots, like the characters, run on and on. *Yang-Yang* jogs for the duration of a single take, which lasts more than two and a half minutes (Figure 2). Less obviously, *Yang-Yang*'s jogging recalls the conclusion of *Breathless*, in which Jean-Paul Belmondo's French gangster Michel Poiccard engages in a protracted straggle down a Parisian street to his death (Figure 3).

The sound accompanying *Yang-Yang*'s solo run in the final sequence makes an auditory pun on the title, *Breathless*. Her footsteps are audible, echoing Antoine Doinel's on the sandy beach. *Yang-Yang*'s breathing is also perceptible, reaching a crescendo as she climbs a hill. When she slows to a walk, the music accompanying her stops, rendering her breathlessness audible. When *Yang-Yang* slows down, the camera continues to roll, but she picks up the pace again as the music resumes one second before the film ends. In a metaphor for product versus process, or film versus filmmaking, one key difference between the final sequences of *The 400 Blows* and *Yang-Yang* is that Antoine's goal is to reach the ocean, which he has never seen before, while *Yang-Yang*'s focus lies in the act of running itself.

In its cinematic self-reflexivity and representation of media, *Yang-Yang* resonates with French New Wave cinema. Be it Shawn's pornographic DVDs, Ming-Ren's shooting of *Yang-Yang* on the track, the footage of a runner's kick-off that she studies or the television programme and film in which she acts, moving pictures in *Yang-Yang* highlight the role of media in contemporary Taiwan. Still photography adds to the focus on visual media and in particular to the objectification of *Yang-Yang*. Her father, like other men such as Shawn and Ming-Ren, reduces her to an image. Even her depths are rendered in two dimensions, as surface, as seen in the x-rays of her calves. The next image of *Yang-Yang* in the film is a photograph of her, presumably taken by her father, on display at the clinic where Shawn takes her for treatment of her ankle. Shawn notices the picture and says to *Yang-Yang*, 'it's you'. *Yang-Yang* looks at her own image, her face partly obscured but her runner's body fully visible and the reflection of her running shirt projected onto the photograph's glass frame (Figure 4). The photograph's title, 'Ange' (angel) and the photographer's name, 'Bernard Dupond', are more clearly identified



Figure 3. Jean-Paul Belmondo as Michel Poiccard straggling to his death in *Breathless*.



Figure 4. Yang-Yang (Sandrine Pinna) examining her biological father's photograph of her running in *Yang-Yang*.





Figure 5. Shawn (Bryant Chang) examining Yang Yang's biological father's photograph of her running in *Yang-Yang*.

beneath the image, from Shawn's perspective rather than Yang-Yang's. She does not know her father or where he is, nor does director Cheng provide any information about how Yang-Yang's father and her presumably Taiwanese former rocker mother met. When Shawn asks Yang-Yang to pronounce the photographer's name, she suggests they leave the clinic, since she is ill-trained to pronounce French and sensitive about her father. Having already set a precedent for tears prior to her mother's wedding, Yang-Yang starts to cry. Her tears suggest that the sprained ankle is a metaphor for emotional wounds. The photograph portrays her recently, meaning that her father took it unbeknownst to her.

Cheng highlights the visuality of contemporary Taiwanese culture. The filming of sequences in Yang-Yang's first two acting stints exemplifies objectification. Yang-Yang's father's photographic portrait of her inspires the shoot of the film-within-the-film's last scene, as well as *Yang-Yang*'s penultimate sequence, which layers visual media. The story of a girl who returns home after her father's death borrows elements from Yang-Yang's own life, adding to the trauma by 'killing off' the father. The mother in the film *mise-en-abyme* looks through a pile of photos, including one of Yang-Yang similar to the one in the clinic, with the legend, 'My daughter is a champion' in French. Like Yang-Yang's father, the now-deceased father of the character she plays took photos of his daughter 'secretly', according to director Laurent, who puts a positive spin on this violation, specifying the father's love as his motivation. The father being dead also raises that possibility for her, adding trauma to the already difficult mystery of her paternity. In any case, her progenitor is dead to her emotionally. Yang-Yang resists Ming-ren's suggestion that 'the character is just like you', saying she would not 'go looking for her father'.

Her father's absence from her life and the mystery of his identity and whereabouts affect her significantly. Without information, there is no closure; without closure, there is no resolution. Immediately after returning from the clinic to find Xiao-Ru at his place, Shawn asks her if Yang-Yang's 'real father' (*fu sheng ren*) is in Taiwan or in France, eliciting a response of irritation: 'Yang-Yang doesn't even know, how should I?' Xiao-Ru senses Shawn's interest in her new stepsister. Shawn continues to pose questions about Yang-Yang's father despite his girlfriend's obvious irritation.

Although the character of the absent father serves as a paradigm for the French New Wave's relationship to contemporary Taiwanese cinema, the paternal role of cinema is a positive phenomenon, despite the obviously orientalist possibilities. Like the French New Wave, Yang-Yang's father lives on. Taiwanese filmmakers such as Cheng use French New Wave cinema to their advantage, integrating it into their own films without slavish idealization. With little or no mainstream concerns such as plot, auteurs such as Tsai and Hou focus less on the character of the absent father, who nevertheless appears in their Sino-French films. However, the role of the father in Tsai's *What Time?* accounts for my focus on it rather than his other strongly Sino-French *Face* (*Visage/Lian*, 2009). Tsai also highlights French cinema, making it an integral part of his Sino-French films.

Depicting the death of a father character and paying homage to a French auteur, *What Time?* provides a clear-cut case of the absent father as a metaphor for French cinema. Although the film predates the French National Museums' sponsorship of Tsai's next Sino-French film, *Face* (see Bloom 2011), as of Hou's *Flight*, Tsai's earlier work nevertheless pays homage to a 'French Master', namely Truffaut, Tsai's favourite director (Bloom 2005, 322) and, as such, his cinematic father. Truffaut himself never knew his biological father. He was raised by his mother and stepfather until he was sent to a centre for delinquent minors, then film critic André Bazin, to whom he dedicated *The 400 Blows*, stepped in to fill the vacated paternal role on his release (Insdorf [1979] 1994, 175). Truffaut also served as the spiritual father of Léaud, his signature actor, until the filmmaker's untimely death of brain cancer in 1983, just as Tsai is the 'putative father' of his fetish actor Lee Kang-sheng.<sup>10</sup> Tsai's own father died in 1992 (Peranson 2002), while actor Miao Tien, who plays the protagonist's father of the same name, passed away in 2005. In casting Léaud in a cameo, Tsai takes over the roles of spiritual father and director formerly played by Truffaut. Tsai is the cinematic offspring of Truffaut, but as director also takes Truffaut's place as the 'father' of the unruly child. As an adult, Léaud became a cantankerous actor who has had a difficult time living up to his child celebrity and turned into a 'real-life' adult version of Antoine Doinel.

At the opening of *What Time?*, Lee Kang-sheng's character Hsiao-kang loses his father. However, Léaud's cemetery cameo and Miao Tien's reappearance at the end of the film reflect that even when 'dead', the father/auteur's image lives on, continuing to make an impact and helping to shape its offspring. French cinema plays a filial role in relation to Taiwanese cinema, which respects and even admires its elder, but also strikes out on its own, innovatively. Miao Tien's passage not only between the living and the dead but also from Taipei to Paris suggests the blurriness of both boundaries and points towards a fruitful intermingling that reinvents both French and Taiwanese cinemas.<sup>11</sup>

Tony Rayns (2002) criticizes *What Time?* for its lack of originality: 'Since Taiwan's film industry died, Tsai's ability to raise funding for his projects has rested on his skill at building and retaining a reputation as a distinctive auteur; hence the uniformity of his recent work. But for all its pleasures, *What Time Is It There?* suggests that a reinvention is overdue'. Jared Rapfogel (2002) makes more compellingly substantive and less commercial sense of Rayns' (2002) (mis)interpretation of Tsai's films as unoriginal. According to Rapfogel (2002), the similarities of Tsai's (first five) films are 'not a function of convention but of compulsion, the variations not a matter of distinguishing [his] . . . films from each other, but of encompassing [his] . . . preoccupations [solitude, alienation] more fully than could be accomplished in a single film'. Tsai's homage to Truffaut contributes to his reinvention and resuscitation of Taiwanese cinema, in part by pushing the envelope in terms of sexuality.

The ambiguity of the character Miao Tien's death resonates with the uncertain status of the French New Wave beyond its demise in 1965. Hsiao-kang's father presumably dies between the opening sequence, in which he tries to offer dumplings to his non-responsive son, and the next scene, in which Hsiao-kang rides in a car, holding an urn with his ashes. The representation of the death in an ellipsis typical of Tsai's films (see Villella 2001) renders it less clear than if it were shown. However, Miao Tien's death lacks subtlety, as the son addresses the urn as 'Ba ba' (father). Clearly troubled about his father's death, Hsiao-kang urinates into a plastic bag at night out of fear of leaving his room because of Miao Tien's ghost (Neri 2006, 67). A watch vendor, Hsiao-kang sells his dual time zone watch to Shiang-chyi, a young Taiwanese woman who is heading to Paris. However, she buys the watch despite his warnings that it will bring her bad luck because he is in mourning over a family member's death.

Miao Tien's passing reflects no uncertainty about whether he has died, but the fluidity of life and death in the Taiwanese spiritual context, which embraces spectrality. In response to the son's request that his father's spirit meet them as their car reaches the other end of the tunnel, Martin (2003) comments, 'Hsiao-kang's unruffled assumption that his father is hanging about in spectral form perhaps causes us to wonder: was it, in fact, already his father's ghost that we saw in the first scene?'. Martin's contextualization of Tsai's film in terms of the supernatural and ghostly phenomena (*Liaozhi*) in Taiwanese popular culture and Neri's (2006) statement that '[i]n Taiwan there is a strong interest in spirits and mediums, a deep faith in the presence and interaction between living and dead' (70) supports the view of Miao Tien's posthumous presence as a ghost.<sup>12</sup>

Although Hsiao-kang calls his mother 'crazy' (shengjing bing) for covering up the light in the kitchen because it frightens his (deceased) father, and her masturbation with a cane headrest (Martin 2003) as she looks at her late husband's photographic portrait may unsettle the viewer, Hsiao-kang's actions and words reflect the Buddhist spiritual context rather than 'craziness'. Rayns (2002) calls the mother's 'idea that her late husband's spirit has come home in a different time zone' 'batty'. This possible explanation for the time change of the household clock is less compelling than the alternative: that Hsiao-kang has shifted it to Paris time, as we have witnessed him doing to clocks around Taipei, since he is obsessed with Shiang-chyi. However, in the Taiwanese context, the spectral interpretation is 'obliquely confirmed by the film's enigmatic ending', in which Miao Tien reappears. The line between Taiwanese spiritual traditions and unusual behaviour in *What Time?* is fine, but the film clearly aligns itself with the former.

Miao Tien's appearance in the final sequence, in Paris, testifies to the Taiwanese spiritual context, but also embodies the circulation of the cinematic father between Taiwan and France, Taiwanese film and French film. Hsiao-kang's mother 'attempts to induce her dead husband's spirit to return to the family's apartment through a series of increasingly elaborate measures' such as setting him a place at the dinner table. Following what Martin (2003) describes aptly as Hsiao-kang's mother's 'escalating obsession with the return of her dead husband's spirit', Miao Tien reappears in Paris's Tuileries Garden, where he retrieves Shiang-chyi's stolen suitcase from the pond (Figure 6). Rayns (2002) refers to the man who fetches the suitcase as 'a passing stranger who looks uncannily like Hsiao-kang's father'. The 'stranger' is familiar, as he is played by Miao Tien. The posthumous re-emergence of Hsiao-kang's father is surprising. The ferris wheel towards which he walks in the film's final shot (Figure 7) represents the Zen notion of rebirth, as well as a film reel, together signifying the notion of cinema as a form of recycling (Martin 2003). Still, rather than resuscitating the French New Wave, *What Time?* exhibits what Martin



Figure 6. Miao Tien at the Tuileries Gardens, Paris, Tsai Ming-liang, *What Time is it There?*

aptly calls a ‘self-reflexive desire to “turn back time” in order to re-inhabit the lost moment of the *nouvelle vague*’ (see also Neupert 2007, xxix).

Jean-Pierre Léaud’s cameo in the Montmartre cemetery parallels Miao Tien’s spectral appearance in the Tuileries Gardens. The particular cemetery is significant because it is where Truffaut lies in rest, thus rendering the spiritual father of both Léaud and Tsai absent presences in the scene, for savvy viewers. Setting the cameo in a cemetery suggests Léaud’s lack of vitality. Full of life as the energetic Antoine in *The 400 Blows*, Léaud became a bit of a ‘washout’ in his later career.<sup>13</sup> Echoing the reincarnation of Doinel in Hsiao-kang in *The 400 Blows*’ gravitron sequence, which the latter watches (Bloom 2005, 319), Léaud also makes a cameo appearance as a semblance of ‘himself’, 40 years older



Figure 7. Miao Tien at the Tuileries Gardens, Paris, Tsai Ming-liang, *What Time is it There?*

and pathetically trying to hit on a beautiful but unreceptive younger woman. Martin (2003) aptly suggests that one form of ‘time difference’ in the film lies in ‘the gap between youth and old age’ seen in the comparison of the young Antoine with the ‘dubious old man in the cemetery’. The stillness and slow pace of the cemetery sequence evoke death. Like Delhomme’s camera, Shiang-chyi, and most of the characters throughout *What Time?* (and Tsai’s oeuvre, for that matter), Jean-Pierre is immobile. He sits nearly inert on the bench, his most pronounced action reaching for a piece of paper on which he writes his telephone number. The character’s quasi-motionlessness mirrors the anthropomorphic figures on some of the tombstones and anticipates the statues in the Tuileries Gardens in the final sequence. The pace of this characteristic Tsai shot, which lasts well over two minutes without a cut and with much silence, conjures up the immobility of death.

A French word for ‘ghost’ is not coincidentally ‘revenant’, from the verb ‘revenir’, meaning ‘to return’. The ‘return of characters’<sup>14</sup> manifests itself not only in Miao Tien’s reappearance in *What Time?* but also throughout Tsai’s ‘family trilogy’, consisting of *Rebels of the Neon God* (*Qing shao nian na zha*, 1997), *The River* (*He Liu*, 1998) and culminating in his first Sino-French film *What Time?*. The method of the ‘return of characters’ harks back to the same *modus operandi* in Truffaut’s ‘Antoine Doinel series’. One of Truffaut’s own ‘literary fathers’, nineteenth-century author Honoré de Balzac, to whom Antoine erects an altar in *The 400 Blows*, creates characters who appear in more than one novel of his multi-volume cycle, *La Comédie Humaine* (Honoré de Balzac, 1978). Truffaut’s tetralogy follows Antoine Doinel into his thirties,<sup>15</sup> as Tsai’s trilogy features the same family members played by the same actors. In Tsai’s more recent film, *Face*, Lee Kang-sheng plays director Kang, no longer nicknamed with the diminutive ‘Hsiao’ for ‘Little’. Lu Yi-Ching continues as his mother, who dies and, in the same state as her recently deceased husband in *What Time?*, is ‘leaving’, as the Taiwanese designate the liminal space between life and death.<sup>16</sup>

The impoverishment of the Taiwanese film industry in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>17</sup> the status of Tsai as *persona non grata* as a result of the incest of *The River*,<sup>18</sup> and the French government’s tendency to subsidize ‘national and “alternative” cinema’ (Neri 2006, 68) account for the insufficient Taiwanese support for Tsai’s work, which left a space for the French.<sup>19</sup> Hou’s work is more plot-oriented, less sexually explicit and less controversial than Tsai’s. Furthermore, he is more rooted in Taiwan. However, the state of the Taiwanese film industry also explains Hou’s receptiveness to Japanese and French funding. The French government’s recent solicitation of films from Taiwanese auteurs, and specifically from its most renowned, Hou and Tsai, reflects its ongoing support of cinema, be it French-auteured or ‘foreign’-directed. On the occasion of the Musée d’Orsay’s 20th anniversary, Serge Lemoine, museum director from 2001 to 2008, invited Hou to contribute to a quartet of films (Lévy 2007). Unlike *Yang-Yang*, which was financed and filmed in Taiwan and produced by the Taiwanese company Zeus International, *Flight* was shot entirely in France, surpassing the stipulation of one scene filmed in the Impressionist museum. Hou cast young French actor Simon Iteanu, son of his French publicist (Lim 2008), as precocious eight-year-old Simon, mothered by French star Juliette Binoche to an absent father who is never seen.

Whereas *Yang-Yang* prioritizes attention to paternity diegetically over the more subtle allusions to French cinematic ‘fathers’, *Flight* inverts this emphasis. Like Cheng, Hou portrays the absence of a paternal figure. However, Simon’s father, who is abroad, and whom the child knows and speaks to on the phone, nevertheless plays a less central role than Yang-Yang’s progenitor, whose disappearance and mystery make his absence gaping and painful. As a young boy, Simon’s psychological response to his father’s distance

is to imagine himself, oedipally, as *pater familias*. When Suzanne receives a long overdue phone call from her estranged partner,<sup>20</sup> we hear primarily her side of the conversation, which reveals that he has given no sign of life for weeks, during which time he has been away from Montreal, where he has spent two years. Suzanne berates Simon's father for not sending money and screams into the phone that she needs the support of a man beside her. Simon responds in Freudian fashion from the back seat of the car that he is a man, not a child or a girl. Indeed, Suzanne announces that Simon found a missing tenancy agreement; in so doing, he has played an adult role. When Suzanne hands Simon the phone, the boy asks his father his whereabouts, revealing that his distance is not merely geographic. Simon's mother interrupts with a reply, then repeatedly implores son to tell father to come home, putting him in an awkward, intermediary role. Returning to his place as child, Simon announces his perfect grade in math to his father. This scene, the only one including the father even as a distinct absent presence, represents him as a voice heard indistinctly through the mediation of the telephone. Suzanne does well to hire the calm Beijing film student to take care of her son. Song's role as a quiet and supportive witness to the domestic drama in the car and more generally positions her as a counterbalance to her employer and her chaotic, destabilized household.

The absent father plays a far less significant role in *Flight* than in *Yang-Yang*, whereas in the former the more important paternities lie in cinema and painting. Since the French government and museums commissioned Hou's film, he not surprisingly highlights the role of the 'French masters', be they filmmakers or painters. Hou foregrounds Albert Lamorisse's 1950s short, *The Red Balloon* (*Le Ballon rouge*), as well as Félix Vallotton's 1899 painting, *The Ball* (*Le Ballon*) (Figure 8), whereas in *Yang-Yang* Cheng leaves

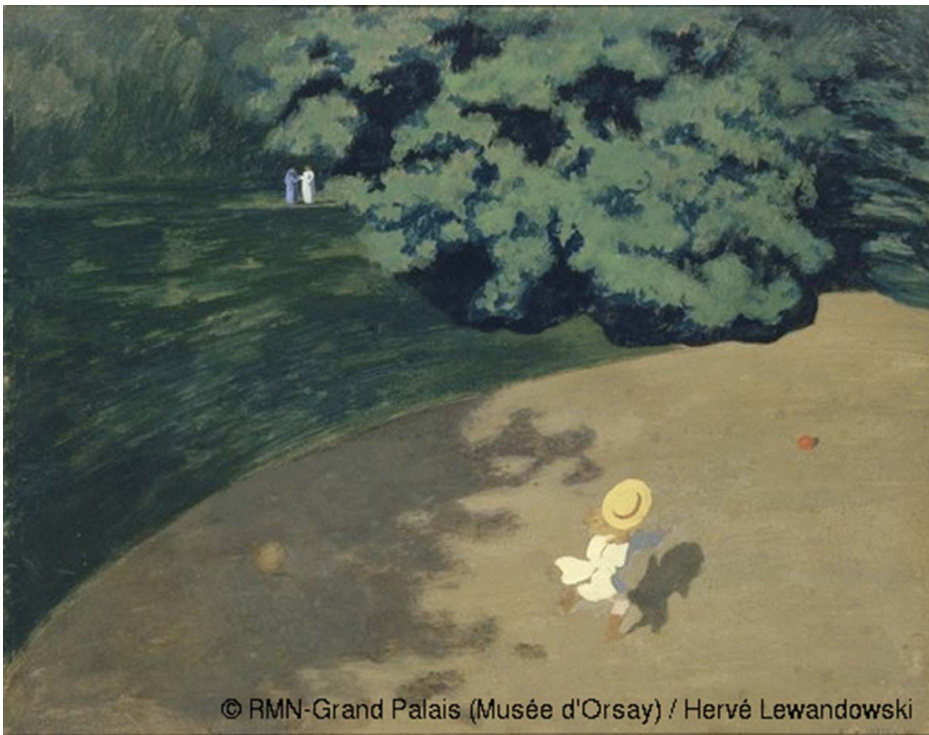


Figure 8. Félix Vallotton : Le ballon, 1899 (RF 1977–353), courtesy of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France, legs de Carle Dreyfus pour le M.N.A.M. en 1953.

Truffaut and Godard in the background, for cinephiles to notice and mainstream viewers to ignore. In *Flight*, Hou connects with France intertextually, less through the French New Wave than through creations of earlier French artists, such as Lamorisse's children's classic and Vallotton's painting featuring a child running after a red ball. Although *The Red Balloon* is well known beyond France, Hou refers to Francophone artists less globally renowned than he might have: Lamorisse rather than Godard or Truffaut; Vallotton instead of Manet or Monet. In invoking the work of well-known artists who fall short of the stature of their most celebrated counterparts, Hou connected with the French, left a space open for himself and even allowed himself a bit of the spotlight. Adrien Gombeaud (2008) finds it strange that 'an immense auteur like Hou would want to place himself under the high patronage of the archaic Lamorisse film, an original homage which is more captivating than the original!' (54; my translation). However, rather than following in the footsteps of his French predecessors, or placing himself 'under' *The Red Balloon's* 'high patronage', Hou invokes Lamorisse as well as Vallotton in order to make something of his own, to expand the scope of his work globally and to stake a place for Taiwanese cinema.

Josh Clover declared of *Flight* that, 'nothing of China remains in this film but for displaced transnational labor' (2008, 6–7), referring to Beijing film student Song Fang, playing herself: a Chinese film student in Paris.<sup>21</sup> Displaced, she is characterized as 'national labor' because she works as Simon's nanny. However, even disregarding director Hou's Taiwanese national identity and that of his puppet master character Ah Zhong, as opposed to Song's Chinese nationality, Clover's argument is off base. *Flight* not surprisingly has fewer 'Chinese elements'<sup>22</sup> than Hou's other films. Despite the French funding,<sup>23</sup> Paris setting, much of its cast and its primary language (French), it nevertheless exemplifies the Sino-French, which in turn reflects the transnationality of world cinema today.

The French film industry is no Hollywood with respect to budgets and special effects, yet French cinema is one of the most important national traditions of world cinema due to the government's consistently strong support of the arts, regardless of profitability, and its contributions to film history over the past century through its directors, movements and actors. The French government appropriates Taiwanese film, claiming Hou's film as its own, housing it in the permanent collection of one of its most celebrated national museums. On the one hand, the French generously fund foreign artists (writers as well as filmmakers); on the other hand, such support is self-interested, serving to enrich the French patrimony. In a win-win situation, it also benefits Taiwanese auteurs and the nation's place on the international film scene.

Not surprisingly in light of the vertiginous layers of intertextuality and hyper-intermedial crossover of *Flight*, Hou discovered *The Red Balloon* indirectly. *Flight* 'loosely adapted' Lamorisse's film, as Hou announced in the closing credits. Hou's discovery of *The Red Balloon* stems doubly from literary works, as Hou discovered the film through *Paris to the Moon* (2001), Adam Gopnik's bestselling account of his life as an American expatriate to France beginning in the mid-1990s. Furthermore, Gopnik refers not to Lamorisse's film, but to his 1976 book. Again consistent with the rich interplay of texts in varying genres and media, Lamorisse's book version of *The Red Balloon* did not inspire his film; instead his literary adaptation appeared after the film and comprises stills from it, along with text.

Even though Lamorisse's *Red Balloon* falls chronologically and cinematically outside of the French New Wave movement, its on-location Paris shooting likens it to the work of its New Wave successors (Neupert 2002, 39) although its characters are French rather than the foreigners populating New Wave films. Lamorisse's film offers a realistic portrait of 1950s Paris, as Hou says: 'One feels the ambiance which reigned and the society of the

era' (Rayns 2002). *The Red Balloon* stars the director's son Pascal along with an entirely French cast. Hou foregrounds not only the red balloon's circulation but also that of vehicles, including automobiles, trains and buses as well as bicycles. In Lamorisse's film, a man rides a two-wheeler; in *Flight*, Song stands next to a red bicycle as she awaits Suzanne, although in a later scene more scooters than bicycles are parked in front of Simon's school, evoking Taipei's popular form of transportation and reflecting the mechanization of the age of globalization. Like its precursor, *Flight* features buses which not only transport people, but also disseminate advertisements, notably of films. A bus both provides the platform for cinematic intertextuality and serves as a metaphor for cinema comparable to the famous rotor sequence in *The 400 Blows* (Insdorf [1979] 1994, 176). After the eponymous balloon has floated into *Flight* in the first sequence, in one of Hou's typical long takes (110 seconds) following the film's title shot, the #76 bus, recalling the open-backed bus in Lamorisse's film, enters the frame from the left. In a metaphor for cross-cultural reciprocity in the form of reaching out in one direction and moving back in the other, another #76 bus enters the frame in the other direction, across the street, behind the bus exiting the frame.

Although Hou alludes with admiration to 'western auteurs' such as Alfonso Cuarón, whose *Children of Men* is advertised on the second #76 bus, he engages in equal opportunity homage (Figure 9). Like Tsai, Hou 'winks at' not just the work of other Taiwanese auteurs, but even his own work. As suggested above, and as Emmanuel Lévy (2007) states, 'The sequence of the Chinese puppeteer show brings to mind Hou's "The Puppet Master" [*Ximeng rensheng*] which won the Special Jury Prize at Cannes Festival'. Like the eponymous character of his 1993 film, Hou is already a 'Taiwanese master' (Darghis 2008). Indeed, *Flight's* Ah Zhong serves as an even more obvious and compelling alter ego to Hou than Song, who is only a novice filmmaker. Whereas she represents the next generation, Ah Zhong is by definition a 'master'. Following Ah Zhong's demonstration to the workshop students, Suzanne explains that typically, each character who enters the scene presents a poem and only a very accomplished master has the licence to improvise ('change a few rhythms'). Hou's own arrival at a stage



Figure 9. Bus advertising Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Courtesy of Margo Films.



where he gives himself and his cast licence to improvise their lines in French suggests a parallel between the Master of Puppetry and the Master of Film, who has a long and illustrious filmography. Although Hou has already ‘arrived’, the arrival of the film industry and the field of film studies at a truly transnational conception of cinema would result in the elimination of the national modifier (‘Taiwanese’) to describe him: Hou is a ‘master’, plain and simple, not a ‘Taiwanese master’. Such nomenclature is consistent with the move away from the national towards the transnational.<sup>24</sup>

Featured in the museum sequence at the end of *Flight*, when Simon’s class visits the Musée d’Orsay, Vallotton’s painting, like Lamorisse’s short, provides a French referent for the Taiwanese director (Rayns 2002). Vallotton’s birth in Switzerland only slightly mitigates the painting’s Frenchness, since his country of origin of course neighbours France, where he also spent most of his life. As part of the Francophone world but also a trilingual nation, Switzerland embodies hybridity. Part of the late nineteenth-century French art scene, Vallotton was ‘associated with a group of Post-Impressionist artists, including Maurice Denis, who took their inspiration from Gauguin and called themselves the Nabis’ (Darghis 2008). However, Vallotton is not as well known as Gauguin or even Denis, perhaps because the Swiss born artist’s favoured genre was the woodblock print, not painting (*Grove Dictionary of Art Online* 2011).

The crossover between painting and cinema is not surprising, given *Flight*’s cinematic self-reflexivity and intertextuality across media. Vallotton’s painting’s contemporaneity with pioneer French films, the Lumière brothers’ earliest shorts, from 1895–1900, furthers Hou’s evocation of the resonances between painting and cinema. Literally framed by Vallotton’s *Ballon* and projected into it, the students discuss light and dark in the painting (Figure 10). The discussion of point of view in terms of camera angle is borrowed from cinema and applied to painting. As Lévy (2007) puts it, ‘a group of children is getting quite an insightful lecture about a painting with a red balloon in the cinematic terms of perspective, angle, and POV’. The teacher asks about the artist’s perspective, eliciting the answer, ‘from above’, as seen in the detail of the painting in Figure 11.



Figure 10. Simon (Simon Iteanu, far right), his teacher and classmates studying Félix Vallotton’s painting in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Courtesy of Margo Films.



Figure 11. Detail of Félix Vallotton's painting *The Ball* at the Musée d'Orsay in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Courtesy of Margo Films.

Simon identifies it as a 'high angle shot'. Through the mouthpiece of this precocious student, Hou borrows cinematic terms to discuss painting, showing the overlap between the two modes of representation, which mirrors the cross-fertilization of cultures in this film.

Hou uses the long take, a signature technique of the Taiwanese Second Wave, not the French New Wave (Udden 2011, 163), which instead features the handheld camera and the jump cut. Whether it is operated by Liao Pen-jung as in most of his films or by Benoît Delhomme, as in *What Time?*, Second Wave Tsai's camera rarely moves. By contrast, compatriot Mark Lee Pin Bing's camerawork in *Flight* is fluid. Yet, like Tsai's shots, Hou's are overwhelmingly long takes. In *Flight*, the shots of the red balloon accompanied by piano music but lacking dialogue often last a lengthy 40 or so seconds. For instance, the shot of the balloon floating through the Paris skies that leads to the museum scene chronologically and spatially runs to almost 50 seconds. Even more remarkable is the more than minute and a half museum long take featuring Vallotton's painting. What makes the 'Vallotton long take' notable is its duration and the mobility of the camera.

Even as Hou looks for inspiration in Lamorisse and Vallotton most specifically, the Taiwanese master's cinematic referencing of the visual arts (or any of the 'other arts' for that matter) resonates with this French New Wave *modus operandi* without, of course, being exclusive to it. Also a French New Wave characteristic but seen in many non-New Wave films, improvised dialogue for Hou echoes that of Godard, as exemplified by *Breathless*'s hotel room scene. Although Hou refers more precisely to Lamorisse and Vallotton in *Flight*, this Sino-French film shares some important characteristics with French New Wave cinema, even as they are not specific enough to testify to influence. French cinema and the arts inspire Hou and his work resonates with French New Wave film. However, as a cinematic father figure to the younger Taiwanese generation, including Cheng, Hou serves a more paternal than filial role. Significantly, even more in the cases of Cheng and Tsai than Hou, France's paternal role with respect to the Taiwanese in no way precludes the Taiwanese in turn acting as father figures of their younger compatriots, no less than of French auters of the next generation such as Hou's friend Olivier

Assayas.<sup>25</sup> Franco-Taiwanese cinematic connections are not simply a two-way street, but are more complex and multi-dimensional.

Although the concept of France's paternal relationship to contemporary Taiwanese cinema may conjure up orientalism, the rebelliousness of the French New Wave, its rejection of the French mainstream movement known as the 'Tradition of Quality' which preceded it and against which it reacted, and aesthetic innovations such as handheld cameras, on-location Paris shooting and low budgets mitigate such a problematic dynamic.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary Taiwanese auteurs follow in the footsteps of French precursors who themselves resisted tradition and endorsed aesthetic revolution. Like the 'other arts', film tends to look backward and recycle, reinvent or engage with past works. In so doing, it looks forward. Contemporary Taiwanese auteurs are revolutionizing filmmaking just as their French New Wave predecessors did.<sup>27</sup>

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### Notes

1. I previously defined the Sinofrench (rendered at that point without the hyphen or capital 'f') as a term that 'characterizes films that bridge France and the Sinophone world, including Taiwan and the mainland. Such connections may go in either direction (or both) and take any form, including but not limited to intertextuality, adaptation, remake, setting, cast, financing and language. What matters most is that the Sinofrench entails intermingling or fusion, crossover, resonance or affinity, rather than opposition or even juxtaposition' (Bloom 2011, 104).
2. Corrado Neri (2006) points out: 'Tsai has been accused of being "unTaiwanese" – he actually is made up of contradictions: he actually does not have a Taiwanese passport – and yet the government has financed his films and marketed them as a national product' (66).
3. The notion of haunting resonates with the work of Fran Martin on Tsai's *What Time?* and re-emerged in discussion with Lin Jiann-guang, whom I thank for a fruitful dialogue.
4. Lim asserts Tsai's worldwide standing unequivocally, stating that he 'is, without a doubt, a pivotal figure in contemporary world cinema and global art cinema' (Lim and Hee 2011, 102). Lim adds that there is no question about his status as an auteur in Europe (Lim and Hee 2011, 188).
5. The Fonds Sud Cinéma funded projects from Africa, America, Latin America and the Near and Middle East, Asia (except Korea, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan) and some eastern European countries (Albania, former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Republics of central Asia), according to Korda, a database on 'public funding of film and audiovisual works in Europe' (Korda n.d.). See also France Diplomatie (2009).
6. CNC: Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (2011).
7. For a list of such low-income countries, see CNC (2013a). Also, beyond the 50–75% of the aid that the production company established in France must spend, '[a]n additional 25% . . . must be spent by the foreign production company, for projects co-produced with countries that have weak film industries', as listed at CNC (2013b).
8. The exception to the rule of French funding of Tsai's films following *The Hole* is *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (Bu San, 2003). See Bloom (2011). Also see Kraicer (2000) as cited by Lim (2006, 258).

9. Kassovitz's *Cafe au Lait* (*Métisse*, 1993) features a mixed race female protagonist, while the three leads of *Hate* (*La Haine*, 1995) represent three different ethnicities (Caucasian Jewish, black North African, and Arab); Kechiche's *Games of Love and Chance* (*L'Esquive*, 2003) and *The Secret of the Grain* (*La graine et le mulet*, also known as *Couscous*, 2007) both portray multicultural France, with an emphasis on Arabs.
10. On Truffaut's illness and death, see Insdorf ([1974] 1994, 220) and De Baecque and Toubiana (1999, 378–394). I have borrowed the term 'putative father' from Neri (2006, 76), who applies it to both Tsai and Truffaut.
11. David Barton (2008) proposes an interesting political reading of the father figure in terms of not France, but Taiwan, when he suggests that the deceased Miao Tien represents 'a fascinating relationship to Taiwan which cannot seem to stop mourning its own dead father, Chiang Kai Shek. . .', as cited by James Udden (2011, 163).
12. In less culturally specific and more technical terms, Christian Metz's (1986) interpretation of cinema as the representation of what is absent also lends support to this view of Miao Tien, albeit suggesting that all cinematic characters, even the living, are ghostly.
13. Philippa Hawker (2000) counters prevailing claims of Léaud's demise: 'It's disappointing to see Léaud presented . . . as if he were a former child star who's kept dabbling in the movies . . . . For an actor . . . whose body of work seems to be constantly redefining itself in relation to what has gone before and from whom we can still hope for so much, it seems almost contemptuous . . .'.
14. Balzac's technique of 'recurring characters', which 'marks his signal contribution to literary history', entails the introduction of characters who reappear in later novels and the return of other characters from earlier ones, according to Peter Connor (2005, xiii–xiv).
15. After *Antoine et Colette* (1962), a short following *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut's Doinel series continues with *Stolen Kisses* (1968), *Bed and Board* (1970) and *Love on the Run* (1979).
16. Thanks to Vivian Nyitray for sharing her expertise.
17. Shu-mei Shih states that the 'local film market' in Taiwan is 'dead' and thus arthouse filmmakers such as Hou, Edward Yang and Tsai are financed by France or Japan (2007, 118).
18. On incest in *The River*, see Chow (2004) and Lim (2006, 142–152).
19. Lim (2007) notes that since Tsai's *The Hole*, the French have partially funded all of Tsai's films, except for *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (*Bu San*, 2003), or about half of his nine feature films up to 2009.
20. Hou explains that he fleshes out each character as completely as possible through back stories; Simon's father Pierre is Suzanne's second partner and a writer living in Canada, although most of these details are not specified in the film (Rayns 2007).
21. Although some reviews, such as Catherine Liu's (2007, 448–449), call Song Taiwanese, according to producer Margolin, Hou made the character Chinese because in reality mainland girls are more apt than their Taiwanese counterparts to work as au pairs in France.
22. In her discussion of Hollywood reconfigurations of Chinese films, Yiman Wang (2009) defines 'Chinese elements (Zhongguo yuansu)' as 'dissociated from a geographical location or national identity, and . . . consequently extracted, appropriated and produced by media capitals' (163).
23. ARTE (ID) coproduced *Flight* for television and Canal Plus and Cine Cinemas pre-purchased it. Although the museum's contribution was ultimately minimal, it was still funded by French sources, albeit private ones. *Flight* is a co-production of Margolin's production company, Margo Films, and Bernard-Henri Lévy's Les Films du Lendemain along with Hou's 3H films, which retained the Asian rights (Margolin in Email 2009).
24. The dropping of the national modifier is analogous to the characterization of a female filmmaker as a 'director' rather than as a 'female director'.
25. Olivier Assayas, once married to Maggie Cheung, directed the actress, along with Jean-Pierre Léaud, in *Irma Vep* (1996). He also directed the documentary, *HHH: Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1997) as well as *L'Heure d'été* (*Summer Hours*, 2008), part of the Musée d'Orsay series.
26. Neupert (2002) discusses Truffaut's seminal 1954 article, 'A Certain Tendency of French Cinema', as a 'manifesto against dominant French cinema' which 'would further establish the phrase "Tradition of Quality" as a derogatory label' (31–32).
27. The one exception to this rule – the male domination of both New Waves – lies beyond the scope of this article, but calls for future study.

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