

Four films from Taiwan and China

By David Walsh
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***Good Men, Good Women*: directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien; *Heartbreak Island*: directed by Hsu Hsiao-ming; *The Postman*: written and directed by He Jianjun; *Lonely Hearts Club*: written and directed by Yee Chin-yen**

In an oft-quoted remark reportedly made to a young Romanian poet in a Zurich restaurant during World War I, Lenin is supposed to have said, in part, "One can never be radical enough; that is, one must always try to be as radical as reality itself."

Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-hsien, born in 1947 in Guangdong Province, China, is one of the world's leading filmmakers. His own films include *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, *A City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster*. Hou has also served as producer on Edward Yang's *Taipei Story*, Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern*, Hsu Hsiao-ming's *Dust of Angels* and *Heartbreak Island*, Wu Nien-jen's *A Borrowed Life* and Chen Kuo-fu's *Treasure Island*.

Good Men, Good Women is a complicated film which demands concentration and thought on the part of the spectator. It takes place in three different time periods. In present-day Taiwan, a distraught and depressed actress, Liang Ching (Annie Shizuka Inoh), starts receiving pages of her stolen diary faxed to her by an anonymous caller.

These bring back to her a period of time in the 1980s when she worked as a bar hostess, hooked on drugs, and had an affair with a small-time gangster. Following his murder, she accepted a payoff from his killers, which she is still living on.

Liang, in the present, is rehearsing for a film. She will play the part of Chiang Bi-yu, a member of the anti-Japanese resistance in China and a left-wing activist in Taiwan in the late 1940s. The story of Chiang Bi-yu (also Inoh) and her husband, Chung Hao-tung (Lim Giong), who is eventually executed in the anticommunist terror of the early 1950s, is the third

strand of the film.

Hou contrasts the life-and-death struggles of the 1940s and 1950s with the efforts of Liang Ching to stay afloat in the 1990s. He says his theme is to show what remains constant, "the true color and energies of men and women." The spectator may not draw the same conclusion, but the film brings two eras and their particular problems to life.

The varying images in *Good Men, Good Women* are extraordinarily distinct and beautiful because they are so purposeful. The film is dedicated to "all the political victims of the '50s." Where else today, except in Taiwan, are such films being made?

Heartbreak Island also involves political repression in Taiwan and its consequences. Chen Lin-ling (Vicky Wei) is released from prison after more than 10 years for her participation in antigovernment terrorism. In a flashback, we see Lin-ling's teacher, Wah Rong (King Jieh-wen), take her under his wing and introduce her to political life. After his arrest, convinced that he faces death in prison, Lin-ling turns to bomb-making. Freed from jail more than a decade later, she discovers that her erstwhile comrades, including Wah Rong, have become complacent petty bourgeois. Her former lover, for example, owns a coffee shop which also serves as a meeting place for students of New Age mysticism. Lin-ling is driven to despair and madness.

Without a trace of sarcasm or misplaced irony, Hsu describes with great acuteness the transformation of a generation. Many of those involved in the real-life incident which forms the historical basis for the film are now members of the bourgeois opposition party, the DPP. The director commented in an interview: "I tend to feel contemptuous of those who turned their back on their own ideals."

The Postman is the second film by He Jianjun, a member of Chinese filmmaking's "sixth generation." Born in 1960, He has worked in various capacities on

films by Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*), although quite different, share certain characteristics. Zhang Yimou. *The Postman* is a devastating portrait of life in a shabby Beijing neighborhood known as the "Happiness District." A damp grey and yellow fog envelops the run-down housing blocks and their inhabitants.

Xian Dou (Fang Yuanzheng), a young postman, lives with his sister in a shabby house, the only remaining link to their parents who died when they were young. He is brought in to replace the former postman who has confessed to stealing and reading letters. A post office colleague plays guessing games about the mail as she frenetically and relentlessly stamps the stack of daily mail. Xian, emotionally cut off from the world, soon starts opening and reading letters.

He becomes involved in the lives of the correspondents: a prostitute, the family of a young suicide, a homosexual couple. At the same time, his sister's marriage throws him into an emotional crisis with shattering consequences.

Twice in the film he tells a simple story about being in a peach orchard with his sister and being chased out. It is at once enigmatic, dreamlike, terrifying. The second telling of the little story, as a voiceover, over the image of his sister's traumatized face, is unforgettable.

The film, perhaps the festival's finest, is a brutal account of psychological damage produced by a repressive and stifling social system. He Jianjun has now been banned from making films by the Chinese authorities.

Lonely Hearts Club is the first feature film by Taiwan's Yee Chin-yen. It lacks the intensity of the other three discussed here, but it is a perceptive study of quiet desperation and boredom. A woman in her forties, Chen (Pai Yueh-O), works at a dull job in an office. Her marriage to an unfaithful husband seems loveless. One day a new office boy, Lone (Hsieh Hsien-tang), appears. She develops a crush on him. She doesn't know he is gay, a participant in a bar scene which also proves chilly and unsatisfying.

Lone's theft of a wallet sets off a chain of events, involving Chen as well, which leads to semicomical, semitragic consequences. In the final analysis, all the efforts of the film's nine characters to make contact with other people fail ignominiously.

Good Men, Good Women, Heartbreak Island and *The*

Concubine, although quite different, share certain characteristics. They each discuss with great frankness and honesty a devastating sequence of events. While advancing an obvious anti-establishment view, none of the directors shies away from the most painful or disturbing revelations. The films contain precise imagery; sure, thoughtful and convincing acting; a certain coolness, even serenity, in the examination of the most terrible difficulties. The films proceed slowly, quietly, rigorously, making no concession to the short attention span of today's average moviegoer, conditioned by television commercials and tabloid journalism.

These are films that at least attempt to begin with life and not certain precepts about life. They don't exist in order to enhance the images and reputations of their makers. Nor are they swept along by the current wave of intellectual and social reaction. Nor do they draw pretty pictures of this or that segment of the population in accordance with the dictates of "radical" politics.

It's a shame that very few people in North America and Europe will ever see these works. They are, in this reviewer's opinion, the closest thing at this point to films which are "as radical as reality itself."

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