Taiwan Cinema, Horror and Body: the Timid Resurgence of Genre Movies Between Nostalgia and Renewal

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Hybrid horrors

1 Even though internationally more famous for its melodramas and auteur films, Taiwan industry has been producing horror movies, especially in the context of the Taiwanese language industry, less controlled by state-sponsored studios that historically managed to confine the “superstitious”, violent or “exploitative” movies. Such moralizing, pedagogical tendencies of state-sponsored films and the parallel censorship dates back to the New Life Movement of the 1930s that contributed to exile ghost movies, as well as the martial heroes’ 武俠片 film from Shanghai to Hong Kong. Yet, as Hong Guojun 洪國鈞 reminds us by quoting Ye Long-Yan:

 [...] prevalent genres during this period do not include thriller or suspense. However, if one reads his categorization carefully, two major genres rely heavily on this particular mode: “social event” and “folk story” films. Many of the films in those two categories recount either real-life or legendary events involving treachery, violence, and even murders: the former often ends with justice served by legal means and the latter by moral resolution. The cinematic mode of narration in those films highlights suspense and even horror. A good example is director Xin Qi’s The Bride from Hell (1965), which tells the story of an abused woman who seeks revenge by posing as a ghost and the wrongs done to whom are righted in the end when her victimizer is arrested by the police.²

2 The memory of local horror movies keeps crawling under the surface. In recent years more and more attention is given to the restauration of forgotten and neglected classics and their rescreening for the contemporary audience.²
Besides the restoration of classics from the past, in the first decade of 2000s Taiwan industry has been trying to renovate the horror genre, including some big coproductions with Hollywood with alternate fortune: Double Vision / 雙瞳 (2002), by Chen Guofu 陳國富; The Heirloom / 宅變 (2005), by Leste Chen 陳正道; Zombie 108 / 弃城 Z-108 (2012), by Qian Renhao 錢人豪, etc. These films, regardless of the producers’ intentions, didn’t make waves – even if some are acclaimed by critics and public, they do not bring a renewal of the industry and a proliferation of genre movies, which is often the indicator of an industry in good health. Yet, some courageous and passionate filmmakers still manage to make small but compelling efforts to rekindle the attention towards horror and thriller.

Two genre films have been shaking the Taiwanese public sphere in recent years, and, especially the first one, has started a small yet significant renaissance of the horror genre: The Tag-Along / 紅衣小女孩 (2015), by Cheng Wei-hao 程偉豪 (1984-); The Tenants Downstairs / 樓下的訪客 (2016), by Adam Tsuei 崔震東 (1959-). Although both labelled “horror movies”, they are extremely different in scope, ambitions, distribution and aesthetic engagement. The first one is a small budget production, while the second one enjoyed a massive marketing campaign. They both are first movies, they both engage the local market to be confronted with international counterparts, and they both dialogue with repertoire and literary production. I will analyze how they strive to obtain international attention, how they deal with local patrimony and repertoire – canonical images – while speaking of contemporary social anxieties. They both tell stories of hybridity and metissage, in which (personal, collective, mediatic) past can be seen as a welcomed memory archaeology – a positive force of identity enhancement – or, on the contrary, as a taxidermic cultural museification – a strong gravitational pull obstructing forward movement. These movies sent contradictory signs – as horror movies often do: they can at the same time express independent drives by challenging Hollywood dogma and mainland censorship through the re-evaluation of local histories and imaginary, as well as manifest an ambition to reach international standards and markets via the application of globalized coded motifs of the genre (generic ominous music, jump scares, graphic violence...). I contend these films are both “new” in term of impact on local market, and deeply conscious of the so-called repertoire / 保留劇目– a term I use to avoid the overloaded “tradition” –, reactivating some elements of Taiwanese popular culture – where this culture is obviously plural and connected to the international.

Young girl dressed in red

The story of Tag-along narrates the mysterious vanishings of aged people. The disappearances seem to be connected to the creepy manifestations of a spooky little girl dressed in red, a color which can be associated – other than weddings and celebrations – to the suicidal individuals willingly to be transformed into ghost to accomplish an otherwise impossible revenge. A young couple – he’s the nephew of the old lady visited by the ghost – investigate, but they soon start to be followed by the threatening spirit themselves.

This classic ghost story is articulated between past and present – both in terms of filmic form as well as narrative; this feud takes place in(side) the body of the female protagonist, that becomes the battleground between the living and the dead, the
“normal” and the “abject”. The past (or “tradition”, or “repertoire”) is here to be understood as a reference to a specific form of collective imaginary: the inspiration for Tag-Along derives from an urban legend diffused by a popular TV show: 神出鬼沒, aired in 1998. Allegedly, a group of hikers filmed a DV home video. One of them died of a sudden illness, and during the funeral the friends displayed the video of their last hiking to remember and celebrate the happy days; surprise came when not only the face of the departed appeared deformed, but also, something uncanny emerged: a little girl dressed in red was following them, apparently unnoticed by the group. After this event the sightings of the girl dressed in red multiplied. The “original” video was aired at the very popular TV show, and the “young girl dressed in red” became a urban legend haunting the collective imaginary.

Actually the spooky form of a spirit from the woods haunting imprudent hikers has much ancient origins and declinations: if in the woods someone called you name, you should refrain from answering or turning your head, otherwise the wandering spirit might catch you; and, predictably, you should always refrain from the temptation to follow a mysterious figure hiking alone, let alone leaving the group. This element clearly links Cheng Wei-hao’s film to local culture. The director, interested in media and the manipulation of the media from his first short movie has a sharp, contemporary approach to social network and communication technology, but underscores nonetheless the capital importance of telling stories related to the region and the local. Horror movies must capture a spirit and an essence of the local culture, especially genre movie must be linked to ancestral fears, folk traditions, and familial narratives. The attachment to “soil”, homeland, local practices, and customs is also the best way, explains Cheng, to avoid formulaic exposition and imitative screenplays; while searching for an original expression is therefore necessary to look back and look into the native land – and its patrimony of stories, legends, customs, voices.

**Japan cool ghosts**

Tag-along undeniably hints at folklore anxieties, but they are transferred in the multimedia / multiscreen / surveillance contemporary world: the mysterious girl, as well as other ghostly apparitions, is invisible to the naked eye, but suddenly becomes perceptible via the screens and cameras, from TV screens to CCTV, cell phones or – as we’ve seen for the source material of the movie – video cameras. As often in Taiwan culture, there are obvious references to Japan classic horror which becomes a sort of artistic reference, consequently an auctoritas in terms of soft power, cultural creation and dissemination, artistic flexibility (or say, freedom). The Tag-Along treasures the lesson of J-Horror from the 90s, a genre that was capable to create a global frenzy by dwelling into a specific local imaginary readapted to the new technologies. The call for a Japanese model allegorizes the need for Taiwan culture and society to have a source of legitimization and fatherly figures. In fact, one of the most interesting cinematic Asian phenomena of the nineties is a remodelling and recreation of the horror genre. Starting from Japan, a new wave of aesthetically compelling, formally revolutionary and thematically influential horror productions has swept Asia (Korea, Thailand, Philippines...), and subsequently the rest of the world in the form of Hollywood remakes. As for Taiwan cultural industry, considering the economic success – encouraged by help from the United States, in both cases – and the complementary
readjustment of values imposed by the West, the former colonizer remains an important model. It is obvious that Japan remains an ambiguous reference for Taiwan: on the one hand, the old colonizer has been stigmatized as the villain *par excellence* until the 1980s – the National Party had to claim its legitimacy as the “liberator”. On the other hand, Japan represents in the post-war moment a political laboratory continually experimenting with democratization and reinvention of the individual – both as a political subject and a consumer (of ideas, as well as of products). It has to be indicated that Taiwan is obviously a place of many voices – in the cultural and social milieus –, which do not share this just mentioned craze for Japan, and which, on the contrary, revive the memory of the injustices suffered during the occupation. But in commercial culture – that includes the genre movies – we also find an enthusiasm for the “cool” forms of the popular culture: manga, anime, video games, costume play, and J-pop mobilize the fans, a bit like everywhere in the world. The J-horror can’t be but a reference for Taiwanese filmmakers trying to renew an industry; and, as Sadako, the iconic ghost of the *Ring* franchise, was famously crawling both from a well – an image of traditional, local, popular, folk origins – and a TV set, a symbol of connected modernity and global media consumption. Here the Young ghost girl appears in (from) the woods and appears in the surveillance screens of CCTV.

**Surveillance angst**

9 The call for a transnational horror model is declined here with a contingent urge to discuss contemporary issues: the screens reveal the horror; inside the screen there is a ghost; the repetition of images of CCTV and amateur video (DV camera, cell phones) makes us feel a sort of surveillance angst. The film indirectly expresses the contemporary obsession with recordings and indexisation, where every our gesture becomes a digital file potentially immediately shared in the public space – which might be haunted by a ghost... The ghost reveals the anxieties lurking behind the changing paradigm of (Taiwan) society. Using the concept of “abjection” which Julia Kristeva defines as what does not “respect borders, positions, rules”, that which “disturbs identity, system, order”,7 seems particularly appropriate. Barbara Creed develops the reflexion by Kristeva:

> Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.8

10 Namely, through the body of the female victims and the ghost: the young female protagonist doesn’t want a kid, doesn’t want to get married; while her boyfriend wants her to marry him, buy her a flat, and – what’s more – go live with Grandma. Besides, we discover at the end of the movie that she decided to abort a child – presumably because the pregnancy came too early and could have impeded her professional life. In the second installment of the *Tag-along* series (2017) we’ll discover that the girl is the member of a tribe: there are several “girls” dressed in red, ready to stick to the sense of guilt of living persons to cling up back to life. In *Tag-Along 2* the public is introduced to a mother who didn’t accept the tragic death of her daughter and created a spell that made her return from the death, in a demonic form hunting down whoever could give her a surrogate mother body using guilt and shame as a lever. The ghost is hunting solitude, leftovers, marginal characters too slow to adapt to capitalist and liberal economy, or too entangled in Confucian moral values to develop a strong defensive self.
The ghost turns into a conservative force calling for attention and generating guilty anxieties that stop the individual development and raise question about the status of the “I” in a collective space. As afore mentioned, women bodies become the field of battle between self-determination and respect for ancestors, expression or repression of desire, accomplishment of personal objectives (for instance professional) or fulfilment of filial duties (take care of elderly and perpetuation of family lineage). The ghost is attracted by the sense of guilt of the independent young women, and by the complementary solitude of the old lady, neglected by her nephew and his girlfriend. She is left alone. She is hence taken away from this world not only by a ghost, but by the inattention of the descendants. When he was still a child, the nephew made an oath that he would always be with her and grant her company during meals, but he grew adult, got interested in girls and left grandma in an unfilial void.

If, as we have seen, the negotiation of Confucian values in modern urban world creates anxieties, Cheng Wei-hao’s movies overlap different forms of apprehension: the conflicting relation with nature is among them.

**Ghostly hills**

The hills and mountain surrounding Taipei encircle and haunt the Confucian civilization; vindicative ghosts are coming to haunt unfilial young women who don’t want to have children or take as victims the old generations left alone by the younger generation, which will have to deal with sense of guilt and alienation of contemporary capitalist society.

In both *Tag-along* movies, the second part is set in the forest all around the city: the demons hide in the wild, calling the name of the livings, ready to unleash uncanny forces that surveillance cameras, cars and taxis, modern furnished apartments, computer and smartphones strive but cannot block from interfering with a regulated city life.

With an interesting collage Cheng’s script mixes “real” and invented spooky sites, existing urban legends and entirely made up ones. In *Tag-along* 2 one of the main setting is an abandoned theme park, today reclaimed by vegetation. Nature is requesting its spaces, invading what used to be a human settling with its disruptive and fearful force. Among the fogs of the forest a display of CGI regurgitates Dionysian, faunal creatures eager to feast on human flesh, offering a carnival of transmutation where the boundaries between human and beast and spirit are crossed, erased, troubled. Cheng admits having consciously mixed up different sources that create a singular impression of suspension of disbelief and judgment. If, in terms of cinematic rendition, both *Tag-along* installments suffer from rudimentary CGI and an imagination too big for the production possibilities (the “creatures” suffer from a very poor production value, and they result visually very early 2000s arcade games), yet the maelstrom of deformation, abjection, body transformations that ends both movies tells the intention to dwell in folklore tales and popular legends that defy explication but stand as powerful images of traumas and collective insecurities. The forest becomes allegory of Dionysian forces ready to invade the apparently well-regulated urban life, pushing at the membrane that separates rational and irrational, entering via the interstices left on the women bodies after the battle between ethic and desire, individuality and sacrifice to the collective.
The movie doesn’t specifically take a stance between the necessity of a regulated, Confucian, family life and individual choices (marriage versus professional life; urban dwellers and mountain temple keepers). But it negotiates the place of the individual in a shifting capitalist society where ancient values are challenged but not yet replaced. The woman body is the centre of the fight: the young protagonist raises public sympathy but is haunted because of her desire to lead an independent life and the right to freely dispose of her body and decide the moment to become mother. She roams in the forest where she is attacked by the young girl spirit that becomes monstrous insect-like nature spirit – very far from the benevolent Totoro-like protector of rural village.

The abject body of what used to be a young girl can also allegorize a cry of vengeance from nature recalling the debate around environmental protection and the very lively anti-nuclear protest of civil society in contemporary Taiwan. Yet again, the movie doesn’t take a univocal stance: the tiger spirit (that appears in the second installment) recalled from traditional religion practise is an adjuvant for the urban characters, but another indistinct form of hungry ghosts reveals a less harmonic relation with nature.

I argue that exactly in this thin line resides the importance of the successful horror movies: create an unease that challenge viewer to reconsider the place of traditional rituals in contemporary society, the agency of women in a patriarchal pyramid, the shifting values of conflicting but historically syncretic system of Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist and Christian beliefs and practices.

**Bodies under control: The Tenants Downstairs (Adam Tsuei, 2016)**

*The Tenants Downstairs* is an adaptation of the homonymous novel by the prolific writer and self-consciously constructed media star Giddens Ko, *Nine Knives / 九把刀*.

The landlord of a multi-storey building set up a perverse panopticon in the flats he’s renting out. He installs in every apartment a hidden camera, and passes his days and nights observing and manipulating the behaviour of his tenants. All of them have all been chosen because paradigms of sexual, social “perversions”: a violent, sex-addicted gym instructor; a nymphomaniac office lady; a divorced, paedophilic father and his innocent daughter; a couple of homosexual men (teacher and pupil); an apparently rigorous and pure young lady who turns out to be a serial killer dedicated to cannibalism. The movie follows the intersected destinies of the tenants who get, via the psychological manipulation of the landlord, more and more violently connected to each other till a paroxysm of violence, gore and sex.

**The body and the actors**

As we’ve seen for *Tag-along*, while trying to open new routes for Taiwanese genre movie via the transgressive representation of abject, sexualised, and tortured bodies, *The Tenants Downstairs* is entrenched in a complex metatextual reseau of influences and inspirations, more or less explicitly evoked. From the very title, we could point a classic like *The Tenant* (Polanski, 1976) where the neighbours seem to try to drive the new tenant crazy in a spiral of surveillance angst, voyeuristic pleasure, megalomania of control, and disclosure of “abnormal” sexual behaviours.
As for Tag-along, when creating a soft core, horror flick, the Japanese industry cannot but represent the auctoritas to call upon as a tutelary deity. The voyeuristic, manipulative protagonist of The Tenants Downstairs makes us think of the Japanese imaginary of the Nikkatsu’s Roman Porno – itself infused by literary references (Kawabata, Tanizaki, Mishima, Ranpo) via the development of themes like voyeurism, control-mania, decay of the body and decadent attraction to youth, the young body as a conscious leverage etc. Many pinku eiga or 日活ロマンポルノ Nikkatsu Roman porno show in fact a male, voyeuristic character that crawls around his neighbours who are unaware of the surveillance state they’re in – in an allegoric mirror screen of the audience itself.

References don’t stop at Japanese soft core: the casting of iconic actors like Simon Yam (1955-) and Lee Kang-sheng (1968-) kindles spectators’ cinephilia and links The Tenants Downstairs to sinophone cinema universe. Simon Yam is an icon of Hong Kong cinema, and especially of exploitation gore horror movie like Naked Killer / 赤裸羔羊 (dir. Clarence Fok 霍耀良, 1992). The body of Simon Yam can be perceived as a sign of memory-resistance vis-à-vis the “mainlandisation” of contemporary popular culture. The iconic presence of the Hong Kong idol in this horror movie hints at the construction of a pan-Asian, sinophone culture that resists, or simply differentiates itself from communist China. The very development of genre films (horror, romantic comedies, action and the likes), often coproduced between Taiwan and Hong Kong, was a specific cultural trait that was conspicuously absent in the mainland till the 90s. It’s a statement of appropriation and of reconnaissance where powerful pop culture icons are described as a part of everyday genre movie consumption and dissemination. These recurrent appropriations say: Taiwan is and has been a home for actors/icons like Simon Yam, hence inscribing itself as a part of global, capitalist, modern democratic twisted world. This connection is an important part of Taiwan identity, made of combinations that become specificities, and help quenching the thirst for self-definition of present day audience.

Another iconic presence strategically cast in The Tenants Downstairs is 李康生 Lee Kang-sheng, the screen persona of the movies of Tsai Ming-liang (1957-) since its very beginning. He stars in all Tsai’s movies, creating a specific, queer, camp alter ego of the movie director, often engaging in a bleak description of urban alienation and a detached autopsy of desire. Tsai’s elitist “slow cinema” cannot be more distant from formulaic The Tenants Downstairs – which is a first movie, even if Adam Tsui was a very active producer for such successful movies as You Are the Apple of my Eyes / 那些年，我们一起追的女孩, (Giddens Ko, 2011). The latter is an exploitative, resolutely genre movie playing with horror and soft porn popular cinema codes, while the former is part of global art cinema circuit, exhibiting high-art attitude via an uncompromising style made of elliptical narration, despoilment (refuse of extradiegetic music, still frames, long takes). Lee’s fictional character grows up movie after movie; taking as a model a cinematic couple, François Truffaut (1932-1954) and Jean-Pierre Léaud (1944-)¹¹, Tsai and Lee develop a fictional character in a sort of an intellectual, allegoric and arty soap opera where themes of incest, homo- and heterosexual desires, sentimental solitude and quest for ephemeral sexual pleasure build up a minimal epic of modernist search for the ultimate sense of human existence. Hence, Lee’s screen persona is a unique, camp and queer representative of sinophone cinema. And even if not explicitly “gay” – i.e. not involved in gay rights movements or the construction of a “gay identity” –, yet
Tsai and Lee’s bulk of work stands as one of the most celebrated and accomplished figure of queer artistic expression – ambivalent, problematic, which eschews all easy definition but contributes in negotiating and problematizing “traditional” heteronormative representations. What’s more, Tsai’s movies contributed to push the limit of censorship and representability in the field of Taiwanese and sinophone cinema. The film *The wayward cloud / 天邊一朵雲* (2005), managed to pass the strict Taiwanese censorship thanks to the prize it earned at the Berlin Film Festival: the director imposed the uncut version that was finally accepted for public screening. As I noted elsewhere, Tsai’s “pornography” is very far from a consumerist practice of fulfilling audiences voyeuristic gaze, since the concern of Tsai’s movie is not the representation of mechanical sexual intercourse and its consequent excitation, but rather the contemplation on tiniest changes of the body, of the maturing and then growing old, the contemplation of repetition and difference in a poetic, allegorical form. For Tsai’s pornography then is not (only) watching a body in the convulsion of the pleasure at making love, but also and especially the patient observation of the body changing in time in the irrevocable progression of human life; and his movies propose a titillation that goes far beyond a superficial exploration of surface, but aims at a form of meditation transcending contingency – but that starts from contingency, that doesn’t avoid nudity and explicit sex scenes.

Besides Japan softcore erotic movies and Hong Kong « category 3 » movies, the cultural references of *Tenant’s* scriptwriter Giddens Ko are the films and novel of Qiong Yao 瓊瑤 (1938-) – not to mention the cross-media attitude of both authors –, as well as Taiwanese “dark movies” (黑社會電影, exploitation films displaying sex and violence, rape and revenge) dating back from the end of the seventies. Explicitly evoking this bulk of popular movies, once academically neglected, yet more and more studied in recent years, is a strategic move to raise a sympathetic public response, a way to link *The Tenants Downstairs* to a lost practice of popular, transgressive-within-the-mainstream production genre.

**Pornography / voyeurism / cannibalism**

By displaying manipulations and distortions of bodies submitted to torture, humiliation, demonic possession and rape, *The Tenants Downstairs* and *Tag-along* raise questions on the articulation of identity and cultural politics in contemporary sinophone cinema. Through the panopticon mechanism of the “watcher in the attic” – a reference to the twisted, ero-guro narrative universe of Edogawa Ranpo (1894-1965), again a classic Japanese modern novelist source –, the public is invited by the landlord himself to watch all sorts of “abjections” or perversions, a kind of compilation of transgressions aimed against conservative Confucian family values: divorce, domestic violence, paedophilia, homosexual love, extramarital affairs are incarnated by the Barnum of *The Tenants Downstairs’* protagonists: the homosexual couple – not so subtly, as we’ve seen – represented by the “camp” iconic figure of Lee Kang-sheng; the female secretary eager to please her boss, the voyeuristic and onanistic nerd, the father sexually attracted by his pre-puberty daughter – in a particularity disturbing sequence he masturbates lying on the bed near the asleep girl. This compilation echoes Creed’s analysis:
In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast (Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde [1941, dir.: Victor Fleming], Creature from the Black Lagoon [1954, dir.: Jack Arnold], King Kong [1933, dir.: Merian C. Cooper Fleming, E. B. Schoedsack]); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (Carrie [1976, dir.: Brian de Palma], The Exorcist [1973, dir.: William Friedkin], The Omen [1976, dir.: Richard Donner], Rosemary's Baby [1941, dir.: Roman Polanski]); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (Psycho [1960, dir.: Alfred Hitchcock], Dressed to Kill [1981, dir.: Brian de Palma], A Reflection of Fear [1973, dir.: William A. Fraker]); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (The Hunger [1983, dir.: Tony Scott], Cat People [1942, dir.: Jacques Tourneur]). Most horror films also construct a border between what Kristeva refers to as 'the clean and proper body' and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity. The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature. In Kristeva's view the image of woman's body, because of its maternal functions, acknowledges its 'debt to nature' and consequently is more likely to signify the abject.\[14\]

26 “The border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire”: the desiring body of the protagonists, and arguably of the audience, is frustrated, mocked, framed, caught in his/her contradictions. The spectator as well is cornered into this contradictory posture where he/she is willingly participant in the display of grotesque perversion, judging but also questioning the basis of his/her value system. I'm not here defending the ethics of The Tenants Downstairs itself, a questionable movie with a questionable directing, with a marketing and representational strategy arguably indulging in a voyeuristic and crowd-pleasing display of aberration; it is nevertheless important in my sense to take into consideration the sheer existence of such rare films, as symptoms of social questioning and unrest. All sexual deviations from the norm – legal and illegal, more or less ethically acceptable – are here positioned under a double lens: the real camera lens and the fictional CCTV through which the landlord spies and influences the behaviour of his tenants. Spectators can arguably be questioned on two different layers of the narration. The first layer is the shock value provided by the catalogue of sexual deviations, made to astonish at a superficial level; the second layer of enquiring might involve an effort to relativize the category of social acceptable norms and – eventually – push these boundaries. If the lusty secretary is a caricatured nymphomaniac character deigned as a pleasure for the infamous male gaze, this representation can put into question the place of women in Taiwan’s real life: their agency and the inequalities they have to suffer from, the feminist movements and the origins of the stereotyped portrayal itself. In other words: why is she supposed to be dwelling upon the dark side of human nature and not just enjoying free and consensual sex? Is she obliged, in order to make a career, to sleep with hierarchal superiors? And if so, why? Moreover, the homosexual couple is stereotyped and maybe offensive to some viewers: but again, why should the landlord (the director?) choose them (adult and consensual) as a sign of depravity? What about the struggle of contemporary Taiwan social movement to legalize gay marriage? What does this representation tell a conservative public? And to someone keen to accept same sex unions? Maybe somewhere in the audience someone was reflecting on opening up possibilities of his/her sexual life that is, on the screen, depicted as perverse, ridiculous and abject, but ultimately only submitted to retrograde stereotypes.

27 Child abuse is a hideous crime, indeed. But the present, manipulative representation, in pushing the boundaries of representability, made me think of Confucian parents/filial
romance where the young generation ends up sacrificing his/her personal satisfaction to obey the parents’ design – see the healthy realist “melodrama” / 文藝片 by Lee Hsing 李行 (1930-), the Qiong Yao romance movies in which young generations are submitted to unbearable pressure to please their parents and so on. The unease provoked by The Tenants Downstairs’ unsettling and explicit scenes tickles psychological, social and cultural sensible points particularly significant in Confucian structure of feeling, where, as demonstrated by numerous texts, the reverse shot of father-daughter/son incestuous desire is represented by the virtuous extreme expression of filial piety: offering his/her own flesh and bones to cannibalistic parents. As reminded by the first paper of the present volume:

"la chair humaine est un remède médical. Le recours à cette figure du corps mangé, en étroite relation avec la notion de piété filiale, est une façon de dénoncer tout ce qui dans l’histoire de la Chine, comme le supposé cannibalisme, relève de la « superstition » et de l’inhumain."

Cannibalism

And we have yet to mention ritual murder cannibalism, as it is linked to the horror genre. The Simon Yam character is aware that one of his tenants, the mysterious lady, is in fact a serial killer luring young men into her house, promising sexual fulfilment, drugging and torturing them. She ends up cooking a feast of human meat for all tenants – an explicit reference to the shocking and iconic representation of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974) –, who remain unaware of the nature of the flesh they’re eagerly consuming. As Emily Yueh-yu and Neda Hei-tung Ng remind us:

Freud claims that cannibalistic urges prevail at the oral stage because “sexual activity has not yet been separated from ingestion of food”. Although aiming at the incorporation of the object, this urge is not simply destructive in nature. It is also an attempt to incorporate the maternal figure as part of self in order to gain possession and control over the external world and to make up for the inevitable loss of the comforting object. The act of eating/consuming embodies an intrinsic contradiction, dialectic of the subject and the other. It is a way not only to contain the other, but also to destroy it (...). Furthermore, cannibalism can be seen as a syndrome of late capitalist, postmodern consumer society - a perpetual pursuit and craving of new stimuli. In seeking these stimuli, the long-dead past must be evoked to fill the gap where sophisticated technologies fail.

Back to the beginning: there is apparently a new mapping of culture and national allegory within the borders of Taiwanese cinema itself. The China factor with its distributions, limitations, and new rules of movie making is to be faced. China has long been the origin and the limit of Taiwan’s cinema imagination: the imaginariness of ancient China (wuxiapian, musical, historical movies) fed the Taiwan (and Hong Kong, and sinophone) screens for decades. Now China is back as a (new) colonial power and/or national motherland. Hence, is Taiwan coming back to the old Confucian man-eating society? Did Taiwan ever escape from it? And: this society is so clearly “negative”? As we have seen, cannibalism is here depicted both as ruthless horror and as an aesthetic, ritualized, collective practice – hence reminding of the classic Diary of a madman parable of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936). The movie remains at an allegorical level, playing with the codes of the genre. But exactly this allegorical level permits it to speak of both a deeply rooted anxiety against an anthropophagus society, and to tell the (totalitarian?) nostalgia that Taiwan residents might feel vis-à-vis the Chinese Empire. The long,
sensual sequences of cuisine serve as horror making and disgust-gore enhancement, but they tell also of a culinary craftsmanship (out of allegory, of refined art and byzantine sophistication) one might remember and cherish.

**Conclusion**

30 Oscillating between disgust and attraction and zooming out of the shock value of the movie, these texts contribute to renegotiate and shift the boundaries of sinophone horror movies, via the description of tortured, split, possessed bodies – especially, but not only, female bodies.

31 These boundaries include the para-filmic realm: *The Tenants Downstairs*’ marketing was especially heavily relying on an aggressive campaign, trying to create and playing with the “scandals” on screen/off screen: marketing and press releases concentrated on the exposure of actors and actresses’ bodies, shifting between their daring attitude and the implicit blame on such mischievous and “western” despise for traditional codes. Many articles, blogs and press events focused upon the “daring actors” who performed a variety of disinhibited perversions of the Confucian moral code. Although less focused on the “scandal”, yet *Tag-along* can as well be valued as a highly mediatic event, stretching from the internet serialised novel by Giddens Ko, passing through the memories of the TV show source material… Both movies are connected and aware of different media platforms that are not only a threat in terms of illegal downloading or streaming, but also forces in terms of thematic concerns and marketing effectiveness.

32 Elaborating previously existing materials for new audiences, both movies expand their scope away from the mainland strict censorship codes. They both are ostensibly not considering Chinese market: they may not be screen in mainland China; their references and appeal run away from the monolithic mainland market and loom towards Japan (pink eiga, highbrow and lowbrow literature, J-horror), Korea and south east-Asia.

33 The recovery of horror genre imaginary can be arguably put in parallel with a more general trend of a renewal of interest in the very immediate past that is both very close and has already disappeared – a feature shared with global conscience, signaling the connected character of local culture.18

34 *Tag-along* and *The Tenants Downstairs* are telling stories about body transgressions and technology angst – cannibalism and abortions, the omnipresence of the CCTV, the video recording, the invasion of social media into private life… The two movies strive to renew a “lost tradition” of Taiwanese movie via the body-horror genre. They are not representative of a cohesive, essential, monolithic “Taiwan culture”; instead they link Taiwan’s experience with other traditions, voices, texts, images… Linking Taiwan (popular) culture to world’s culture (Hong Kong, Japan, the West), is a way for the authors to resist a supposedly cohesive “Chinese” culture, helping the present reader and viewer to renegotiate their own, private, moving, shifting sense of belonging and identity. In this sense the focus on Taiwan cross-media and transcultural proactive nostalgia in contemporary world might be of great value in the future development of the entire sinophone visual and narrative sphere, because of its liminality – a liminality that proves to be a central privileged point of view according to Stéphane Corcuff:

Summarized to its narrowest definition, geopolitical liminality here defines an asymmetric interdependence where the small entity has something to say in the
couple formed with the bigger entity, thanks to the historical and cultural thickness of their geopolitical relation over time. A geopolitical understanding of liminality, in this sense, may be exportable to other fields in the discipline; perhaps not without the risk of losing some of its substance, but hopefully as a way to rebalance the analysis of the strengths of the weak, as well as of the weaknesses of the strong).¹⁹

The liminal strategy recurrently appears in the contemporary popular cultural production, as exemplified by various chapters of the novel *Grace of Kings* (2015). This groundbreaking silkpunk epic by Ken Liu (1976) based on *The Art of War* / 孫子兵法 of Sun Tzu 孫子 (6th-5th century BC) and the classic wuxia novels as *Three Kingdoms* (三國演義 XIV century), illustrates the strategic value of the positioning in the corner. The elements of popular culture evoked by Cheng and Tsui may seem scarcely influential, residual, and unimportant. Yet, their characteristic of being at the same time specifically localized with specific toponyms and aware of representing transcultural fluxes make them relevant in shaping urgent questions around transcultural memories, local subjectivities and politics, and the place of nostalgia in the context of the contemporary fast connected world. *Tag-Along* and *The Tenants Downstairs* both display a very classic, readable, globalised standard cinematic language, without the asperities typical of high-brow New Taiwan cinema: linear montage, clear storylines, chapter division, beginning-climax-end, and emotional orchestra background music. At a content level they dwell in the deep of local popular and folk culture, reminding present-day Taiwanese public the cradle of current reality and the necessity of self-reflexion. This “Taiwanese identity” is understandably as plural as elsewhere; but in both cases, it identifies plurality as a distance from Mainland China and a specificity of Taiwan – to be cherished or critiqued, but never to be erased. They might be read as being a metaphor of today Taiwan’s self-search. We found in these movies the call for a collective writing of media history, for a rejuvenation of definition of identity and community belonging. This consensus is built through commercial movies that use a folk imaginary implanted on a pan Asian, if not global, cinematic genre, an open and multicultural consumerist reality.

Marc Ferro urges to read a historic film for what it says but also if not especially for what it refrains from saying, looking for the Freudian slip likely to help the scholar formulating a diagnosis, and analysing the “ideological and social zones” which were suppressed.²⁰ We might then see under the surface of a pathos-numbed or shock valued film the “call to arms” to build or rebuild the consciousness of the multiplicity of a specific Taiwan contemporary identity, in a constructive dialogue with global trends. Even if Taiwan contemporary cinema industry can’t resist neither the sirens of China in terms of distribution and production nor the international, Hollywood-style pattern of narration, there will still be voices establishing, rekindling and revamping what made Taiwan arguably unique – its unique combination. Therefore, behind the immediate pleasure of exploitative cinema, even these commercial retro films (and their success) can implicitly tell us of the necessity to defend a specificity. These movies show bodies being deformed, tortured, mutated, as narrative and visual strategies to face perceived threats of identity discontinuity, and express and experiment an already transforming space of expression.
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NOTES


2. See for example The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell / 地獄新娘, 1965, by Xin Qi 辛奇, recently restored and rescreened for the “Taiwan’s Lost Commercial Cinema: Recovered and Restored” Project: https://taiyupian.uk/.

3. Many texts have been researching on Chinese ghost imaginary. I’ll just signal here a comprehensive recent bilingual French-English collective work that spans all over Far East Asia and dwells both on present day representations as well as on classical texts: DURAND-DASTÈS Vincent et LAUREILLARD Marie (eds.), Fantômes dans l’Extrême-Orient d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, 2 vol., Paris, Presses de l’INALCO, 2017, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pressenalco.1274. Particularly interesting for our research are the articles of PESSIN Annika, “The Other Child: Symbols of Life and Death in Medieval China” and of JUNLIANG Pan, [Disease, Possession and Exorcism. The Ghost-seeing Phenomenon (jiangui 见鬼) in the Chinese High Middle Ages] / “Maladie, possession et exorcisme. Le phénomène de la voyance des esprits (jiangui 见鬼) dans le haut Moyen Âge chinois”, since it’s a question of possession and exorcism in Tag-Along as well.

4. The brave readers can find the “original” video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pTY5tKW7HyI, consulted on 18/06/2021; an interesting contemporary TV show discussing both the source material and Tag-Along: youtube.com/watch?v=nkbmZ1jKIIs, consulted on 18/06/2021.

5. Death of a Security guard / 保全員之死 (2015) is a mockumentary entirely constructed by CCTV images, TV news, interview, Facebook video files etc.


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