

Representing Foreign Workers in Taiwanese Films: A Multicultural Lesson for the Taiwanese Audience?

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Introduction : “Wai-lao”, foreign labors in Taiwan

The presence of foreign workers in Taiwan dates back to 1989. They were first employed for public construction. Then starting from 1992, private sectors were also authorized to employ a certain percentage of foreign workers.¹ The term ‘Wai-lao’ (外勞), which the Taiwanese people use to refer to these temporary migrant workers, literally means “foreign labors” in Chinese. It does not carry pejorative connotations in itself, but it often invokes stereotypical images of “workers coming from countries with inferior economic and cultural development”. The Taiwanese commonly perceive the term as either female domestic workers or male construction workers from Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand or Vietnam. Foreign workers from Northeast Asian or Western countries are not included.

In Taiwan, the number of foreign labors increased significantly over the past two decades. According to the statistics published by the Ministry of the Interior and Council of Labor Affairs in Taiwan, there are in total 425,660 foreign labors with residence permits by the end of the year 2011. Their group consists of multiple nationalities, with Indonesian workers representing the majority (175,409), ahead of workers from Vietnam (95,643), the Philippines (82,841), and Thailand (71,763). In regard to sex, female workers (260,004) are more numerous than male (165,656). Most of the female workers are employed as caretakers of the elders (196,007), and are in charge of domestic works in Taiwanese households.²

The emergence of migrant workers is a globalization phenomenon that followed the successful industrialization of Taiwan and its economic growth. As their number stably increased every year since 1992, they are no longer considered as the “invisible” others to the Taiwanese citizens. For many Taiwanese families nowadays, migrant domestic employees, in particular, play an important role in their daily life. Their direct contact with foreign workers accentuates some social boundaries, which were not clearly revealed among the Taiwanese citizens. Pei-Chia Lan points out in her monograph *Global Cinderellas—Migrant Domestic and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*,³ how different social boundaries and inequalities on a global scale may contribute to stratified “Otherization”. Besides the social

class divisions, it is also a matter of national disparity and racial/cultural differentiation. Lan's analysis of different aspects of "racialization" of foreign workers clarifies the various origins of discrimination in Taiwanese society.

In fact, relative sociological studies and fieldworks had already begun as early as the 1990s, long before social movements which claim human rights for migrant workers took the form of demonstration in Taiwan by the end of 2003. To a certain extent, the emergence of fictional creation that turned to the subject of foreign workers accompanied the rise of public awareness of their living conditions. Yet the part which mainstream political discourse played in Taiwan over the past two decades should not be neglected: it offers a context under which representing foreign workers might also be justified from a « multicultural » point of view.

1. *Nyonya's Taste of Life* (2007), *Detours to Paradise* (2009), and *Pinoy Sunday* (2010) under the Taiwanese context

In Taiwan, the attempt to represent foreign workers was first shown in the literary field, more precisely, in different literary contests. In 2001, Taipei city government organized its first annual poetry contest in which the foreign labors were able to express themselves in their mother tongue.⁴ Nevertheless, it was around 2005 that foreign workers appeared as protagonists in literary reportage and in short stories written by Taiwanese authors.⁵ Later on, the Taiwanese audience also was introduced to the following three featured films dealing with the living conditions of foreign workers: the 2007 television film *Nyonya's Taste of Life* (娘惹滋味), the 2009 film *Detours to Paradise* (歧路天堂) and the 2010 film *Pinoy Sunday* (台北星期天), which are the focus of this present article.

Such phenomenon piqued my interest: the local film industry had almost vanished completely in Taiwan, and independent filmmakers were producing their movies under harsh conditions, yet the three filmmakers placed foreign labors as the center of their works,⁶ far from the mainstream taste. Not only am I interested in exploring the different strategies employed by the filmmakers in the representation of the images and lives of foreign labors in Taiwan, but also the favorable context that the films were under that made them speak to the Taiwanese audience.

My first reflections on the "favorable context" under which the three films were conceived led me to ask the following question: could the films convey a multicultural message to the Taiwanese audience?

In the first decade of the 21st century, a certain cultural diversity was promoted by the Taiwanese institutions in different fields, including that of artistic creations. A possible "multicultural message" is, however, only hypothetical due to the following reasons. First, the term "multiculturalism", now generally accepted but vaguely understood by the

Taiwanese, is an introduced foreign notion. It incorporated different, even contradictory political positions during its process of “indigenization”. I will explain that process further on. Second, one might consider the following events as proves of the democratization of Taiwan: the official recognition of Taiwanese aborigines by the Constitution in 1997, and the founding of the Hakka Affairs Council in 2001. However, under the proclaimed multiculturalism, identity crises of different ethnic groups seem to persist. Would the Taiwanese-style multiculturalism lead to the construction of a new Taiwanese cultural nationalism? Would this new cultural nationalism, which presumably goes against Chinese nationalism, end up resembling its opponent? Lastly, does the multicultural spirit extend to the communities of foreign labors, who are in reality temporary migrants under surveillance? These are some points to be observed under the changing discourse of multiculturalism in Taiwan.

Regarding the circumstances under which multiculturalism was introduced in Taiwan, I would like to refer to Mau-Kuei Chang’s articles to present a clear overview. In two of his articles published in 2002, Chang analyzed the “discursive formation” of multiculturalism in Taiwan.⁷ Between 1949 and 1987, Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, was governed under Martial law by Kuomintang’s authoritarian regime (henceforth KMT). Chinese nationalism and sinocentric ideology took the dominating position in the official political discourse for a long time. The legitimacy of the Republic of China was doubted in the 1970s ever since the People’s Republic of China replaced the country’s seat in the United Nations. Meanwhile, democratic movements that rose against KMT’s dictatorial government still wavered between political liberalism and traditional nationalism. Under this context, the local Taiwanese identity gradually remodeled itself in reaction to the oppression and the censorship imposed by the government. According to Chang, scholars first introduced the theory of “pluralism” in the 1980s in order to solve the identity crises of different ethnic groups in Taiwan and to harmonize the social conflicts of this period. The attempt was to reintegrate ethnic diversity into a more general Chinese identity. It seemed to be contradictory to the idea of “pluralism”, but in Taiwan, it did not stop the discourse of “pluralism” from contributing to the emergence of “multiculturalism” in the early 1990s, even though the two ideologies each derived from different Western trends of thoughts. After Martial law was lifted in 1987, the new political trends that emerged came to be highly ethnic-oriented; different positions converged on the discourse of “four major ethnic groups” in Taiwan:⁸ aborigines, Minnan Taiwanese, Hakka Taiwanese, and Mainlanders. Multiculturalism was therefore more widely received.

On one hand, recognition and protection of the rights of different ethnic groups were aimed at overturning the Chinese ideology focusing on great unification; on the other hand, a new Taiwanese identity was born and it led to the incorporation of different ethnic groups into a single “life community”. Education reform ensued in the mid 1990s: the China-

centered program was phased out through replacements of new Taiwan-centered textbooks, along with mother tongue lessons corresponding to each ethnic group. Starting in the year 2000, the new immigrants and their children were also integrated into this reform. In short, “multiculturalism”, inspired by Australian and Canadian experiences for instance,⁹ has been adapted to the changing society of Taiwan and its complicated political situation. Yet one may still wonder if the multicultural spirit in consensus nowadays had actually extended its perimeter to foreign migrant workers, or if it is merely a strategy that Taiwan employed to cultivate the country’s distinctiveness from China. All things considered, the common underlying role of cultural diversity behind these three films, which had been encouraged and expected, therefore should not be ignored, even though the three filmmakers expressed that their works had been conceived out of their own personal experiences and inspired by different film directors.

2. Reflecting “Ourselves” through the “Others”: fusion, exploitation, satirical reflection

(1) Insights of the three featured films

After summarizing the trends of thoughts that could have gone into the process of fictional creation in Taiwan in the past years, I would like to make a brief introduction of these three films.

Nyonya’s Taste of Life, as its title indicates, tells a story of ethnic fusion through food and life experiences.¹⁰ In this television film, the *Nyonya* cooking, a fusion experience in itself, is prepared by two Indonesian migrant workers, Sari and Cindy. The film presents how the taste of their cooking conquers the Taiwanese stomach. Sari and Cindy work for two distinct Taiwanese families—one of Minnan Taiwanese, and the other of Mainlanders. Sari takes care of the children who have lost their mother in the first family, partially because the handicapped grandmother refused her care. Cindy accompanies the aging father stricken with Alzheimer’s disease of the other family. The film director Chih-Yi Wen chose to represent the intertwined lives of Sari, Cindy, and their employers as a complex portrayal of Taiwanese society at present:¹¹ even though different ethnic groups, languages, cultures, and mentalities towards the Others have created prejudices and misunderstandings, the possible resultant fusions are perceived as a process of life, and a balance can be reached after all the sufferings that they have gone through.

The second film—*Detours to paradise* (originally titled as *Sincerely yours*), directed by Rich Lee, focuses on two marginalized foreign workers without residence permits. The two being an interracial couple is the reason why they communicate in Chinese: the man, Supayong, comes from Thailand, the woman, Setia, from Indonesia. Escaping from the pursuit of Taiwanese police, their lives are represented as a succession of exploitation, from odd jobs

to odd jobs. The friendship and love among foreign workers form a separate world, which reflects the social injustice and hierarchy imposed by the mainstream world—the Taiwanese one. According to an interview with the film director,¹² the eruption of conflicts between Setia and her Taiwanese employer, Man-Guang Fei, a former Taiwanese opera singer, had been edited out of the new version of the movie for television broadcast and international festivals. In the new version, the melodrama ends right after the separation of the two lovers: Supayong, captured by the police, is deported back to Thailand, and Setia becomes a call girl with her Thai friend Wonpen. The film consistently explores the “underground society” in Taiwan parallel to its folklore strangeness and indifference.

The third film—*Pinoy Sunday* is a comedy of the urban adventure of two Filipino workers, directed by Wi-Ding Ho.¹³ These two friends, Manuel and Dado, reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy, work in a Taiwanese bicycle factory and have some rather funny love affairs at their leisure. One Sunday, the two, dumped by their girlfriends, meet each other and then see an abandoned couch at the side of the street—a couch that embodies their unrealizable dreams. Manuel, who imagines enjoying the great comfort of the couch on the terrace of their dormitory, convinces Dado to move it back with him. The sheer size of the couch causes them many troubles on their way back. Comic episodes follow one after another, and they reflect multiply and ironically the neurotic ways of life of the citizens in Taipei. The metaphorical couch-transportation finally ruins their Sunday: Manuel and Dado miss the curfew of the dormitory. Consequently expelled from Taiwan, they keep making hilarious daydreams back in their hometown. In contrast to Taiwanese people, their simplicity and cheerfulness mark the end of the movie.

(2) Different strategies in representing the Others

These three films are quite distinct in genre and in plots. They reveal not only different communities of foreign workers, but also their different ways of living to the Taiwanese audience who tends to place them in the same category. Observations are made by the filmmakers on several aspects of cultural differences, such as religious worship, food or value system in all of the three films.¹⁴ Nevertheless, other than their homesickness and friendship being similarly brought up, the three films depict foreign workers in very different ways. This is not only because the films tell different stories with different types of characters, but also because the three filmmakers conceive differently the images of foreign workers through that of the Taiwanese citizens. In other words, they employ different strategies in representing the “Others” and their relationship with the Taiwanese. Furthermore, this also signifies that they do not necessarily anticipate the same receptive attitude from the audience.

In *Nyonya's taste of life*, foreign workers are represented as dedicated workers who fight

for the happiness of their own family afar. The narrative voice of Cindy announces in the beginning that coming to Taiwan for work is like a journey full of uncertainty. She asks the following question for herself and other migrant workers in her situation: “besides the money, what kind of memories will we take back with us to our homeland?” To the Taiwanese audience, family and hard work are two things that constitute a part of their fundamental values, and the way foreign workers are depicted—as human beings with delicate emotions—seems to be an appeal for compassion. Conversely, various attitudes of Taiwanese employers are shown. Family members clearly divide themselves between two opposing camps: one embodies discrimination, such as the grandmother of the Minnan family and the son of the Mainlander’s family; the other embodies inclusion, such as the widowed employer of Sari, and the daughter who treats Cindy as her own sister in the other family. In search of a common ground that can presumably solve this opposition, Chih-Yi Wen uses food as medium.¹⁵ The concept of fusion is realized in the end through a new life brought into the world from a mixed marriage between Sari and her widowed employer.

Detours to paradise takes a critical position toward the Taiwanese citizens, though contemplative shots seem to be preferred in order to lessen the movie’s accusing tone. In fact, the Taiwanese are portrayed as indifferent exploiters and most of them play figures that are deprived of voices. The voiceless Taiwanese are seen with their weird funeral ceremonies and folklore performances, while the victimized foreign workers are unable to avoid the tragedies befallen upon them. Yet, as opposing as the foreign workers and the Taiwanese citizens may seem, it is intriguing to see that this film chooses Chinese, the language spoken by the exploiters, as the language shared by the foreign lovers. In addition, Taiwanese songs are also chosen to create the atmosphere for their wandering lives and love. As *Nyonya’s taste of life* stresses a form of ethnic co-presence through diverse spoken languages, and *Pinoy Sunday* puts precedence over the Tagalog, *Detours to paradise* crosses the language barrier in the very beginning. Could such paradox be considered as one of the strategies of the film, since it remarkably shows the skill of taking an intellectual distance from the most dramatic scenes?¹⁶

Pinoy Sunday uses the comedy genre to represent the “Others”, which in turn do not carry any pre-existing label in association with foreign labors. Their adventure is based on a series of absurd situations in which the duo keeps involving themselves. In the film, the two protagonists are portrayed as optimistic easy-going daydreamers, while citizens of Taipei are portrayed as being extremely tense and slightly insane. For example, Dado and Manuel happen to pass by a crowd yelling while watching a boy on the top of the building trying to commit suicide. The couch they transport accidentally saves the boy. The entire scene is live broadcasted on the Taiwanese television, causing the two men to be pursued by journalists. Through the eyes of the two “outsiders” who do not understand what is going

on, the Taiwanese audience realizes how ridiculous but familiar this scene could be. By surrounding the Taiwanese audience with 99% of foreign languages, the comedy in Tagalog reverses completely the positions of the observing and observed subjects; the Taiwanese audience of the film would soon realize that it is their fellow Taiwanese who are represented as the "Others". The linguistic barrier and the reversed positions give Wi-Ding Ho a critical distance that helps to reveal the ignorance of the Taiwanese people.

Conclusion

This article has placed the three films under the relatively recent "multicultural" context of Taiwan in order to trace back to what could have led to the emergence of the films. Furthermore, in the first decade of the 21st century, literature and cinema in Taiwan geared towards redefining the "Taiwaneseness", which echoed with "Taiwanisation" on a political scale. Representing foreign workers through fictional creations may seem to go against mainstream at first glance, but in my opinion, this actually converges with mainstream through other means. The issues regarding ethnic groups, which were frequently debated in Taiwan over the past two decades, contributed to the attempts to represent foreign workers in featured films.

Yet, placing focus on the "Others" is not for the sole purpose of bringing forward new perceptions of them. The way that the filmmakers represent foreign workers reflects also their different interpretations of Taiwanese society: *Nyonya's Taste of Life* focuses on a multi-ethnic fusion; *Detours to paradise* emphasizes divisions; *Pinoy Sunday* reveals bizarre behaviors of the Taiwanese unbeknownst to themselves. On top of it all, this article explored in particular my interest in the strategies they employ to represent the interaction between the Taiwanese and foreign workers: *Nyonya's Taste of Life* searches for common ground, *Detours to paradise* requests self-reflection, *Pinoy Sunday* uses comedy and irony to speak to its spectators. Through representing the "Others", these filmmakers invite the Taiwanese audience to face up to their multiple selves: the complex self, the concealed ugly self, and the ignorant self. In the present new decade, politics and society in Taiwan have gone through other considerable changes: what will the cultural diversity and the respect for this diversity come to in the near future for the Taiwanese citizens? Will this diversity still be highlighted and focused in some fictional creations in the following years?

Notes

- 1 In 1992, the "Employment Services Act" (《就業服務法》) was published by the government of the Republic of China. The Chapter V of this act, entitled "Employment and Administration of Foreign Workers", provides the regulations for employment of Foreign Workers in different sectors of activity.

- 2 The quoted statistics are extracted from two governmental websites: one of the Council of labor affairs, a department of the Executive Yuan of the Republic of China: http://www.cla.gov.tw/cgi-bin/siteMaker/SM_theme?page=49c05774 (English version); the other website is that of the Ministry of the Interior, more precisely from its department of statistics : <http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/index.aspx> (Chinese version).
- 3 Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: migrant domestics and newly rich employers in Taiwan*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.
- 4 The contest has been enlarged into “poetry and essay writing contest”. Here is the 2012 contest announcement: <http://english.dol.taipei.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=20104052&ctNode=15893&mp=116002>
- 5 For example, Yu-Ling GU 顧玉玲 was awarded the China Times Literary Prize in 2005 for her report entitled “Run away” 〈逃〉. It tells the story of a Filipino migrant worker in Taiwan whose name is Caroline. This report was first published in the literary section of the China Times, but we can also read it on the website of the Taiwan International Workers Association: <http://www.tiwa.org.tw/index.php?itemid=100>
- 6 According to the blog of the Chinese Taipei Film Archive, *Detours to paradise* was projected during two weeks in the cinemas of Taipei (<http://blog.yam.com/fa88/article/41135569>), *Pinoy Sunday* during five weeks (<http://blog.yam.com/fa88/article/41139082>). The box office in Taipei of the first film counted 122,000 N.T. dollars (approximately 3,100 Euros), while that of the second amounted to 1,370,000 N.T. dollars (approximately 35,100 Euros). Although these results did not include other cities’ box office in Taiwan, they still could give us a picture of the general acceptance from the Taiwanese audience.
- 7 Chang, Mau-Kuei 張茂桂. 2002. 〈台灣是多元文化國家?!〉. 《文化月報, 三角公園》, 13, 1. Chang, Mau-Kuei 張茂桂. 2002. 〈多元主義、多元文化論述在台灣的形成與難題〉. In 薛天棟 (Ed.) 《台灣的未來》, 223–273. Taipei: 華泰文化事業公司.
- 8 Ibid., p. 242.
- 9 Charles Taylor’s work, *Multiculturalism and “the Politics of Recognition”* (1992), is one of the references frequently quoted by the Taiwanese scholars when dealing with subjects in regard to multiculturalism.
- 10 *Nyonya* refers to the female descendants of Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia who married to native Indonesians or Malays.
- 11 Chih-Yi Wen mentioned in the following interview that her source of inspiration was the Indonesian caretaker of her own grandmother: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lycr48o1Me0>. In 2009, she transformed again this personal source of inspiration into another short film *Sleeping with her* (片刻暖和), which is artistically more ambitious than the television film *Nyonya’s taste of life*.
- 12 *Detours to Paradise* was broadcasted on Taiwan Public Television Service on the 10th of January 2010, followed by the director’s interview. In this interview, Rich Lee mentioned moreover his contact with migrant workers when he studied in London in the 1990s. Several films dealing with the subject of migrant workers had also inspired him, for example, *Dirty pretty things* (2002)

directed by Stephen Frears and *In this world* (2002) directed by Michael Winterbottom.

- 13 Wi-Ding Ho told the journalist that the idea of *Pinoy Sunday* originated in a short film of Roman Polanski, *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (1958): <http://taiwantoday.tw/ct.asp?xItem=105883&CtNode=436> (English Version).
- 14 For instance, Islamic worship is represented both in *Nyonya's taste of life* and *Detours to paradise*. In the first one, Sari frightens the grandmother of the Minnan family with her praying gesture and clothes. In the second one, it is represented as the last salvation for Setia. In *Pinoy Sunday*, Catholic mass is filmed in details along with the Filipino communities.
- 15 The menu of the restaurant held by the widowed employer reminds the spectators of a Stephen Chow's cult film *God of Cookery* (1996, 食神), which is another kind of fusion.
- 16 Here I refer to the scene in the train in which Supayong accepts silently the dishonorable offer of the Taiwanese man. The sliding door of the toilets is shut and replaced by the fleeing landscape outside the window. The shot prevents the spectators from perceiving directly their deal. When the door opens again, the hands exchanging the money are very tightly framed. As the film director Rich Lee said himself in the interview previously quoted, the sequence reminds us the way Robert Bresson avoids dramatic scenes in aid of the interaction between "flattened" images. Bresson developed this point of view in *Notes sur le cinématographe*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.

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