

## Conference Paper

# Overseas Communication and Acceptance of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Films-Centering on Franch Cahiers Du Cinéma

**Tan Xiaohan**

Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

### Abstract

The criticism on Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films of the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* is an important landscape for oversea propagation of Chinese cinemas. The attention to Hou Hsiao-Hsien lies mainly in his naturalism lens style and realistic poetic characteristics. The present article tries to restore the *Cahiers du Cinéma's* critical standpoint, scale and reason on Hou Hsiao-Hsien film, and also answer the three questions: In what ways do the French critics pay attention to the Chinese films? What is their focus? And, why do they keep such a watchful eye on Chinese cinema? The logic and angle as well as the ways of criticism behind their attention can provide many inspirations for Chinese-language cinemas studies.

**Keywords:** Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Cahiers du Cinéma, overseas communication

Corresponding Author:

Tan Xiaohan

tanxh633@163.com

Received: 29 August 2018

Accepted: 18 September 2018

Published: 11 November 2018

Publishing services provided by  
**Knowledge E**

© Tan Xiaohan. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICOI-2018 Conference Committee.

The historical process of overseas communication of Chinese movies is one kind of symbol on the development of Chinese movies. In the process of overseas communication, movies have become the carrier or medium to bear the important task of cultural exchanges between the East and the West and the importance of communication is obvious. From the date of its birth, Chinese movies are not blank in western media. By the middle and late 1980s, the introduction and comment about Chinese movies that can be seen on paper media in Europe have made an impressive sight. It was the most important exemplification that *Cahiers du Cinéma* introduced Hou Hsiao-hsien. As one of the most important theoretical journals about the history of world cinema, the attention of *Cahiers du Cinéma* on Hou Hsiao-hsien was both the confirmation on Chinese movie directors and the supplement of movie history which has hidden the secret logic on overseas communication of Chinese movies. It can be said that through the overseas communication and acceptance of Hsiao-Hsien Hou's movies, what we see is the clear thinking method of overseas communication and integration of Chinese movies.

 **OPEN ACCESS**

## 1. Cahiers du Cinéma, Assayas and Hou Hsiao-Hsien

1984 was the most significant year for overseas communication of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies. In winter of this year, France Art Center and Film bi-weekly organized the activity to introduce Taiwan new movies and composed articles to declare that "A small incident was shaking the movie circle in Southeast Asia" ([1] 57). Several weeks after the activity was finished, the edit team of *Cahiers du Cinéma* which have enjoyed a good reputation for a long time due to "New Wave" arrived in Hongkong to participate in Movie Festival. During this period, accepting the invitation of Taiwan filmmaker, Chen Guofu, Olivier Assayas who served as the movie critic of magazine at that time went to Taiwan to open a pleasant and thoughtful trip in Taiwan and understand the development history of Taiwan movies for decades. In the course, Assayas made the acquaintance of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang and other young directors and chatted with them joyfully. After returning to France, he introduced information about Taiwan movies to the magazine colleagues which has directly facilitated the appearance of "Focus on Taiwan" at the end of 1984. To commemorate the trip in Taiwan Assayas composed "Our Journalist in the Public of China" which has systematically presented the production status, development trend of movie, "the industry outside the world" in Taiwan at that time as well as introduced Hou Hsiao-Hsien separately. It was also the first time for Hou Hsiao-Hsien to officially appear in the French movie critics circle. In 1984, "All the Youthful Days" successively was invited to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> HIFF, the 28<sup>th</sup> London Film Festival and the 6<sup>th</sup> France Festival of the 3 Continents which has been known as the master work of Taiwan new movies and it also has become a craze for Chinese movie to go overseas.

With the increasingly mature and diversified creation of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, comments from overseas media were also increasing in quantity and quality. In 1989, the propaganda strategy of "A City of Sadness" was adjusted and a batch of authoritative medias including "The New York Times", "Time", "Cahiers du Cinéma" and "The Village Voice" were invited to Taiwan for interview. The movies and directors attracted worldwide attention. Assayas came to Taiwan again in this propaganda activity and had deeper understanding on Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Successively separate meets and deep exchange of Assayas and Hou Hsiao-Hsien made him film a documentary film named "HHH, Un portrait de Hou Hsiao-Hsien" (1997) which has become the most original and critical video data for European to know and understand Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Meanwhile, Assayas composed articles on "Cahiers du Cinéma" to introduce Hou Hsiao-Hsien, the director from Taiwan that he liked and understood to French readers and elaborated

the reasons why he was attracted by Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies in written form. The documentary film and article jointly caused intensive response which has made Hou Hsiao-Hsien become one of the indispensable perspectives for research on Taiwan movies in France. Until now, Assayas still believes that letting the world know and recognize Hsiao-Hsien Hou is the most proudest thing in his work career in "*Cahiers du Cinéma*". The attention of Assayas and "*Cahiers du Cinéma*" on Hou Hsiao-Hsien first came from their curiosity and recognition on wave of Taiwan new movies while Hou Hsiao-Hsien also happened to be the representative of Taiwan new movies. In critical discourse of "*Cahiers du Cinéma*", "New Wave" of Taiwan was the emotional expression for the first generation of immigrants after domestic war in China. It "inherited the spirit that those exiled filmmakers never abandoned their own mainland status and tried to find the past", "alerted Taiwanese to return to reality" so as to "pay attention to specific things instead of immersing in dreams, past and unreality" ([1] 59). This kind of appeal was the detachment from softening the reality and beautifying the pattern of love as well as the reflection and adjustment on movies or the relationship among movie art, nature and real life. It was clearly similar to innovation posture of "New Wave" in France. Hou Hsiao-Hsien quickly received much concern relying on filmmaker image of "New Movies" in this atmosphere. In 1985, upon recording Locarno International Film Festival, Charles Tesson has been highlighted "A Summer at Grandpa's" and believed that this movie together with "*All the Youthful Days*" displayed the new custom of Taiwan movies which also further conformed that "*Cahiers du Cinéma*" attached great importance to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's "New Movies" filmmaker.

## 2. "Reverse Forward Push" and "Reverse Rhythm": Temporal and Spatial Metaphors of Lens Language

The general impression of "*Cahiers du Cinéma*" on Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies is that his movie works had reality sense, simple lens language with individuality. The key words for the magazine to comment on Hou Hsiao-Hsien included fixed view, back lens and long lens which constituted the language foundation of the aesthetics of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies as well as laid a quiet and objective tone and a real atmosphere. The method of fixed view has been detected by Charles Tesson in 1985. "*A Summer at Grandpa's*" has released to the public in Locarno International Film Festival in that year but in Tayson's opinions, the method did not entirely belong to Hou Hsiao-Hsien while imitating Yasujiro Ozu, the Japanese movie director. Through themes (family crisis and pain) and techniques (fixed filming and slow tempo), the movies focused on indoor

environment and family atmosphere like Yasujiro Ozu ([2] IV). With the increasingly mature of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's master on lens, the beauty of quiet and backward movie language has also been gradually recognized. Particularly, the reality and quiet shaped by Hou Hsiao-Hsien via "fixed view+backward lens" in *"Dust in the Wind"* made Jean-François Pigoullie highly praise that the distance without sense of disclosure created by the director was just the desire to tell the truth ([3] 72).

"Fixed", "Backward" filming technique also shaped the space sense of movies. Antoine de Baecque, the famous French movie critic also mentioned Hou Hsiao-Hsien's filming technique with backward feeling and believed that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's fixed view and backward filming technique actually advanced the movie's sense of space. Because after the lens drawn back, the view in "frame scene lens" was another kind of eye contact and expansion which was more like one kind of way to feel distance and time. In a certain distance, the lens can occupy a better viewing position without moving but can obtain more time to start or complete meticulous movement ([4] 32). As a matter of fact, no matter Assayas, Pigoullie or de Baecque, they all pointed out that the objectiveness and sense of distance produced by Hou Hsiao-Hsien were also one kind of very cool sense of lens like alienation effect of Brecht. Backward filming, retreating lens or frame scene lens all internally presented one kind of the intention of "anti-forwarding" of "forwarding" on resistance to formalism ([5] 67). This kind of intention obviously abandoned the integration of movie lens and construction of movie significance while selected one kind of presentation method which was more authentic, direct, fresh and modest. In the opinions of *"Cahiers du Cinéma"*, it was the critical element to form the style of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's movies.

If the backward lens accomplished Hou Hsiao-hsien's spatial metaphor of "anti forward push", the use of the long-lens realized the slow rhythm of Hou Hsiao-hsien's films, revealing the time metaphor of "anti rhythm". Hou Hsiao-hsien is expert in using long-lens, the work style or the image aesthetics manifested by long-lens always exert a very important role both in the perspective of European and American theory and in the category of local research. Assayas explained the feelings and effects brought by Hou Hsiao-hsien's long-lens from the aspect of narrative point of view, he pointed out "Hou Hsiao-hsien is particularly focused on the relation between them (lens - citer noted) and time, and think that it is unnecessary to be so manic to finish telling the story - let the art of drama develop naturally, we can fix it in cubism if we like, a given and complicated truth can only emerge through the combination of the same time and different angles." ([6] 27) It is thus clear, Assayas believes that long-lens affects time, and the rhythm of the film. In that case, the rhythm of the film and

the theme performed jointly constructed the film works with with national and local characteristics, at the same time, it makes Hou Hsiao-hsien's film style richer.

It is worth putting out, Hsiao-Hsien Hou's long-lens is closely related with the development and exploration of Taiwan films: four directors: Li han-hsiang, King Hu, Lee Hsing and Bai Jingrui are good at using long-lens, the average lens length of Lee Hsing's films can reach 10 to 12 seconds, which provides some logical approach to Hou Hsiao-hsien's long lens aesthetics. Starting from *The Sandwich Man*, the average length of Hou Hsiao-hsien's film lens started to exceeding the the average level the long-lens of Taiwan films in the same period; and the long-lens become the symbol of Hou Hsiao-hsien's film since *A City of Sadness*, and the length of the lens has reached the commanding heights in *Flowers of Shanghai*, the length of 154.5 seconds far exceeds the world's recognized long-lens masters (such as Theo Angelopoulos, Kenji Mizoguchi). This also reflects the reason of attention to Hou Hsiao-hsien by the *Film Guide* from one side.

### 3. "Nature" and Realistic Poetics: Style of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Movie

Firstly, Hou Hsiao-Hsien was a "Nature" filmmaker in the language environment of "*Cahiers du Cinéma*". He has always been basing on the native land of Taiwan to use film means with most sincerity and Taiwaneseeness for narrating local stories and persisting in local image aesthetics in Taiwan. If Edward Yang possessed internationalism and modernity and what Hou Hsiao-Hsien presented was original naturalness kept by regional environment and the exploration process on local experience. The second level pointed on the theme of movies which emphasized that Hou Hsiao-Hsien used characteristic movie language to express the natural status of geography, history, life and ordinary people, this kind of status always maintained the true sense of life and character of real life ([1] 58). On the natural basic, most comments of "*Cahiers du Cinéma*" regarded "Realistic Poetics" as the major foodhold of Hsiao-Hsien Hou's movie aesthetics. "*Cahiers du Cinéma*" brought Hsiao-Hsien Hou's movies into the system of Realistic Poetics for his expression means of movies, expression themes. In addition to the above, what' more, his works conducted poetic discussion and criticism on human existence status in reality, social and historial issues via smart perspective and persisted in examining the humanistic dimension in social development. Each movie of Hsiao-Hsien Hou can be stressed in the future as if existing circles complemented the centripetal patterns of other circles and formants. The work contents for the director

of *"Dust in the Wind"* not only focused on movie contents but also grasped the core of the gossamer. He was in the family first and then the country. This kind of devotion also clearly showed that a complex, ingenious and experimental work ran through Hou style movies. The same natural retreating mean started to present human in reality from history and family time<sup>[7]118</sup>. It was to highly appreciate *"Dust in the Wind"* and present Hsiao-Hsien Hou's reality and strengthen the accurate statement on the characteristics of Realistic Poetics.

#### Hou Hsiao-hsien's Chinese nature and global nature

The filmmaker identity of the new film, the unique film language and the film consciousness in the theme selecting and expressing process, are the important factors for the favor of Hou Hsiao-hsien's works by Film Guide, are also the main foothold on which Hou Hsiao-hsien's works that the European criticism and research can be based. In addition, the Chinese tradition or the Chinese character of the Hou Hsiao-hsien's films mention in the Film Guide, and the thoughts towards Chinese character in Hou Hsiao-hsien's films are the significant aspects for the concern of Hou Hsiao-hsien by Film Guide.

In the narrow sense, the Chinese nature refers to the Chinese literature, culture and historical tradition reflected in Hou Hsiao-hsien's works. In March 1990, Film Guide set up "the new world" column, Bénéric Reynaud reviewed the background and related events of the Taiwan's "new film" wave and analysed the characteristics of the "marriage of literature and film" for the new film representative works in the New wave, in which the emphasis was put on *The Sandwich Man* and *All the Youthful Days*. Assayas's documentary and film critics even directed into this direction, he pointed out Hou Hsiao-hsien is a "Chinese film director", his growth and work style certainly will appear its inherent nationality and territoriality; but "he is different from the Chinese filmmakers in the same age, this obvious fact is also verified by itself. He did not sell himself abroad of pretending to be exotic for fear, nor is changed by the principles of western drama. On the contrary, the roots of his inspiration extend to the Chinese aesthetic tradition and his stories." <sup>[6]128</sup> So, for Assayas, Hou Hsiao-hsien's Chinese nature first originates from relying on China's traditional aesthetic concepts and specific materials, rather than the exaggerate Chinese style to cater for overseas curiosity, such strength of Chinese nature comes from persevering. In a broad sense, Hou Hsiao-hsien's Chinese nature is a face of oriental or Asiatic. Jean-François Pigoullié saw the influence of the eastern tradition on Hou Hsiao-hsien in *Dust in the Wind*, he pointed out, " Hou Hsiao-hsien maintained the tradition of Yasujiro Ozu's films and Chinese paintings, and also deeply influenced by the Taoism's absolute respect for the universe.

This constitutes the whole view of Taiwanese filmmakers: why disturbing the order of the world? Why shooting super real performance? It is in itself harmonious, it is the aesthetics of *Dust in The Wind*." [8]<sup>73</sup> From his perspective, the aesthetics of *Dust in The Wind* is related with the concept of Japanese films, Chinese painting tradition and Taoism theory, which established the whole view of the Taiwan filmmakers. In a way, Pigoullié's statement covered the Chinese nature talked by Assayas, it also expands the extension of this nature, becoming the pan-Chinese character after the integration of multi-culture.

## References

- [1] Olivier Assayas, *Notre reporter en République de Chine*, in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1984.12, n° 366:57-59.
- [2] Charles Tesson, *Cinéma en lac Majeur*, in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1985.10, n° 376:IV.
- [3] Jean-François Pigoullié. *La Voie de la sagesse*. in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1991.4, n° 442:72-73.
- [4] Antoine de Baecque. *Mister Hou et l'expérience du regard*. in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1997.4, n° 512:32.
- [5] U.S. J.Dudley Andrew. *Classical Film Theory*[M]. translated by Li Weifeng, Beijing :Beijing World Publishing Corporation, 2013:67.
- [6] Olivier Assayas, *HHH, portrait de Hou Hsiao-hsien*, in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1997.4, n° 512:27-28.
- [7] Jean-François Rauger. *Naissance d'une nation*. in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1993.6, n° 469:18
- [8] Jean-François Pigoullié. *La Voie de la sagesse*. in: *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1991.4, n° 442:7