



The Rice Dumpling Vendors

燒肉粽

Synopsis

Yong Xin Motion Picture Company

Executive Producer:
Huang Pianpian (黃翹翹)

Producer: Dai Chuanli (戴傳李)

Director: Xin Qi (辛奇)

Original Story: Tu Liangcai (涂良材)

Screenplay: Xin Jinzhu (辛金傳)

(pseudonym of Xin Qi)

Cinematography: Liao Qingsong (廖慶松)

Sound: Lin Kunqi (林焜圻)

Music: Huang Xishan (黃錫山)

Lyrics: Lin Lihan (林禮涵)

Editor: Huang Qiugui (黃秋貴)

Cast:

Yang Ming (陽明)

Jin Mei (金玫)

Jin Tu (金塗)

Dai Peishan (戴佩珊)

Su Zhu (素珠)

1969, B&W

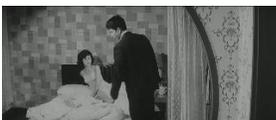
84 minutes

Tsibing (Mandarin: Zhiming, played by Yang Ming, also known as Cai Yangming) is a wealthy and successful modern man. A member of the new middle class, he goes to work in a suit, has a wife (played by megastar Jin Mei) and three children, and can afford a nanny for the kids. However, he also has a mistress. She conspires with her lover to manipulate Tsibing into believing that his wife is having an affair. When he finds a man's boxer shorts in his wife's bed – the film was originally called *The Underwear Scandal* – he throws her out.

However, Tsibing's mistress vanishes with all his money, and a downward spiral begins. Forced to relocate to a slum with his three children, he takes on a labouring job and tries to keep his children in school. Although everything seems to go wrong, help comes from unexpected quarters. Tsibing's eldest child, a daughter (played by Dai Peishan), secretly takes on various jobs to keep the family afloat, including selling the eponymous rice dumplings. And his comical but kindly working-class neighbours challenge Tsibing's middle-class prejudices by consistently supporting Tsibing's and his daughter's efforts. Will the family find a way out? Will the villains be caught and punished? Will Tsibing realize that he has misjudged his wife? Will anyone buy a rice dumpling?

Commentary

Melodramas of development were a staple genre in the Taiwanese-language cinema industry. Their heyday coincided with the era of Taiwan's economic miracle, during which annual growth rates of 10% were regularly maintained. Two things distinguish *The Rice Dumpling Vendors*. First, there is a gender reversal. Most melodramas of development focus on the struggles faced by young women, whereas *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* puts the spotlight on a man struggling to bring up his children alone. Second, most films are about the dangers faced in the transition from the countryside to the city. But Tsibing's



problems begin when he is well-established in his new modern lifestyle. Perhaps it is no coincidence that *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* was made at the end of the sixties, after more than a decade of urbanisation. Nevertheless, what Tsibing's story shares with other Taiwanese-language melodramas of development is its status as a cautionary tale. The so-called Healthy Realist Mandarin-language cinema promoted by the KMT government also included plenty of melodramas of development. But they are glossy and optimistic, whereas the Taiwanese-language films are full of danger, deceit, and exploitation.

The Rice Dumpling Vendors has all the typical characteristics of the melodrama genre. As a narrative form, melodrama is all about timing. Tragedy is the result of bad timing. If only Tsibing had come home moments earlier, he would have realized his wife was attacked by an intruder. If only his wife had revived earlier, she could have disposed of the supposedly incriminating boxer shorts before Tsibing came home. Comedy and especially happy endings – if they occur – are the result of good timing and pleasant coincidences. Furthermore, melodrama is all about the challenge of establishing new values in the face of social change. All of Tsibing's problems are the result of his moral mistake in taking a mistress. In a sense, all the trials and tribulations he goes through with his children are one long lesson in how to behave in the modern world.

Xin Qi (also known as Hsin Chi) was one of the most prolific directors in the Taiwanese-language film industry. Having trained in theatre in Japan during the colonial era, he turned to cinema at the end of the 1950s. He made films in every genre imaginable, including the gothic drama *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* (1965) and the youth drama *Dangerous Youth* (1969), both of which were featured in our 2017 tour.

The producer of *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* was Dai Chuanli, who also worked with Xin on *Bride*, and whose daughter Dai Peishan is featured in both films. A highly commercial impresario, Dai had great ambitions for his somewhat creepy child star daughter, who sings the main song in each film. As well as songs, *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* also features a variety of other audience-pleasing attractions. These include the comic antics of popular character actors Jin Tu and Su Zhu, who play the working-class couple next door; the sexual titillation of the opening set-up; and even a bit of kung fu promised early on by Jin Tu's character and delivered later in the film. The combination of romantic leads with comic sidekicks and entertainments like the songs, fights, and so on exceed the usual characteristics of melodrama. But they are completely characteristic of the traditional opera forms, including the Taiwanese *go-a-hi/gezaixi* opera that launched Taiwanese-language cinema over a decade before this film was made, and might have helped the film to find its audience.

Looking at the film today, as well as the insights it offers into the anxieties of the times, an additional appeal is its use of locations for outdoor scenes. These give us a rare glimpse of the ordinary streets, buildings, and other features of everyday life in Taiwan during the martial law era.