

An Introduction to a Taiyupian Filmmaker, Xin Qi
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Xin Qi (or Hsin Chi, 1924–2010) was a prolific Taiwanese filmmaker. Throughout his career, Xin Qi navigated his films between state censorship and the market and produced at least 52 movies across different genres from 1957 to 1979. In the first edition of our “Taiwan’s Lost Commercial Cinema: Recovered and Restored” project in 2017, we included two of his films—*The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* (*diy xinniang*, 1965) and *Dangerous Youth* (*weixian de qingchun*, 1969). In our 2020 edition, we are pleased to be able to add to the portfolio three more films by Xin Qi, all recently restored by the Taiwan Film Institute—*Encounter at the Station* (*nanwang de chezhan*, 1965), *Foolish Bride, Naïve Bridegroom* (*sanba xinniang han nüxu*, 1967), and *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* (*shao rouzong*, 1969).

Xin Qi once said that the movie he wanted to make the most was a script he wrote in 1951, *The Men without Motherland* (*meiyou zuguo de ren*), based on a true story of Taiwanese soldiers who were drafted by the Japanese to fight in Southeast Asia. After the war, some of these soldiers were stranded overseas but neither the Japanese nor the Nationalist (i.e. Kuomintang or the KMT) governments accepted them as citizens. The script ended at the 28 February Incident of 1947 when one of the protagonists lost all hope in the future, which might be seen as a reflection of Xin’s own identity crisis. Xin Qi could not find any investors interested in the script in the 1950s and it remained an unmade film.

Xin worked in a variety of theatre-related jobs between 1951 and 1956, and he was introduced to filmmakers Shao Luo-Hui and He Ji-Ming when the first wave of Taiwanese-language cinema took off. Xin was involved in the production of the first modern melodrama in the Taiwanese-language cinema, *Flower on a Rainy Night* (*yu ye hua*, dir. Shao Luo-Hui, 1956). One year later, he was given the opportunity to direct his debut Taiwanese opera film, *Gan Guo-Bao Goes to Taiwan* (*Gan guobao guo Taiwan*, 1957), a popular story set in the eighteenth century. The protagonist, Gan Guo-Bao, loosely based on a historical figure, was originally a little hoodlum from Fujian. When he grew up, he went to Taiwan, joined the army, rescued the emperor and became a national hero. Xin Qi recalled that almost everyone on the film crew was a novice. For example, the cameraman used to be a sound recording technician, and Xin himself was from a theatre background. Although Xin and his team had to learn the entire production process from the beginning, the film was profitable and so he was quickly commissioned by investors to make three more Taiwanese-language feature films between 1957 and 1958.

When Xin Qi realized that there were no Taiwanese-language films aimed at children, he established a small film company focusing on Taiwanese-language 16mm educational films. Unfortunately, it was a loss-making venture and the business closed. Xin rejoined the commercial feature film sector in 1963 when the second wave of Taiwanese-language cinema returned with a vengeance. The local filmmakers, investors and distributors were all more experienced than during the first wave. Moreover, the American involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s brought wealth to Taiwan as the island was considered a bulwark against Asian

communism. Once the general economy improved, the development of local film industries also benefited. Xin Qi became one of the most popular Taiwanese filmmakers by producing projects such as *The Night of Jiayi Earthquake* (*tianzai dibian bi yi ye*, 1964) and *Alias Lover* (*Shuangmian qingren*, 1965). The former was a disaster movie while the latter was a horror sci-fi film, both of which created special effects that were unusual in Taiwanese-language cinema at the time. Xin was most prolific in 1969 when he made fourteen movies, most of which were slapstick comedies.

Among Xin's cinematic works, he was most proud of *Back Street Lives* (*Houjie rensheng*, 1966), a black comedy that critiques economic growth and the human cost of modernization. The story is set in a compound where the residents feel increasingly marginalized by society because of their poverty. Xin Qi pointed out two specific aspects of the plot which were potentially problematic at the time. First, a young lady becomes a mistress to two men at the same time. While one man sees her on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, the other visits her on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Xin said that the plot was meant to satirize the censorship system as the Government Information Office (GIO) censors worked on two shifts each week. Second, two men who are neighbours to a prostitute hear curious noises from next door in the middle of the night. The editing deliberately makes the viewers think that they are hearing someone having sex, but in reality the noise comes from another household where a grandchild gives a massage to his grandfather. In the end, the GIO censors did not censor either element. But they were extremely unhappy with another scene, which caught Xin Qi by surprise: A postman delivered a letter and the letter was half in and half out of the letterbox. The letter was blown away and triggered a series of subsequent events. The GIO believed that a plot like this would damage the image of the postal service of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan and demanded a reshoot where the postman must push the letter completely inside the letterbox, which took away the trigger for the entire sequence of following actions. In the 1990s, when Xin Qi got the opportunity to re-watch *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell*, he said he was unhappy with the movie. In particular, he did not like the choice of background music and felt annoyed with himself that he simply followed the producer's instructions and made excessive use of Japanese scores in the movie. The censorship of *Back Street Lives* and Xin's personal regret regarding *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* are both extremely revealing of how local filmmakers were commercially and politically constrained during the era of Taiwanese-language cinema.

One of the major challenges facing the Taiwanese-language film industry was the shortage of viable scripts. The GIO imposed many restrictions and would reject any plot elements that were deemed too cruel and frightening, politically incorrect, overly critical of the authorities or without optimistic dialogue. Under these circumstances, the local filmmakers relied heavily on Taiwanese opera troupes for material that was not only relatively easy to adapt, but also politically and financially less risky. On the other hand, the KMT government did not encourage Taiwanese opera cinema because the genre was considered provincial, which did not sit comfortably with the Chinese nationalism the ROC aimed to promote after the 1950s or the accelerated developmental modernization policy it subscribed to in

the 1960s. Thus, Taiwanese-language filmmakers sought inspiration from a variety of additional sources, including modern theatre groups, folklore, myths, news stories, current affairs, local and foreign novels and foreign movies.

Among the five Xin Qi films collected in our “Taiwan’s Lost Commercial Cinema” project, *The Bride Who Has Returned from Hell* (1965) was adapted from English female novelist Victoria Holt’s gothic thriller, *Mistress of Mellyn*. Xin might not have dabbled in Western literature, but he demonstrated his creativity by inventing a hidden sibling relationship between the female protagonist and the missing mistress, which adds dramatic tension not included in the original story. *Encounter at the Station* (1965) was adapted from a 1959 fiction, *Fickleness of Mankind* (*Leng nuan renjian*), written by local female novelist Jin Xing-Zhi. While the book was full of political correctness and a spirit of anti-communism, Xin turned the movie adaptation into a heart-rending story between two men and two women. *Foolish Bride, Naïve Bridegroom* (1967) is a delightful comedy which gives us a witty, willful, and physically strong female protagonist who is equal to her husband-to-be and future father-in-law. *Dangerous Youth* (1969) critiques materialism and greed by subverting the conventional gender hierarchy and making the cabaret hostess the most powerful character. The movie is not only a poignant and critical work in Xin Qi’s repertoire, but also an outstanding achievement in Taiwan cinema as a whole. Equally impressive is *The Rice Dumpling Vendors* (1969), which was inspired by a news story at the time and a popular Taiwanese song with the same title. The movie contains one of the most memorable scenes in local cinema, which elevated the film to classic status: both father and daughter are peddling rice dumplings unbeknownst to each other, but on a rainy night they meet in the street and cry in each other’s arms. Upon closer examination of these restored works today, there is no wonder that Xin Qi is retrospectively considered one of the most notable and respected auteurs of the Taiwanese-language cinema.

Bibliography:

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