

FINDING HOME IN HOU HSIAO HSIEN'S

THE PUPPETMASTER

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A storyteller is a life poet, an artist who transforms day-to-day living, inner life and outer life, dream and actuality into a poem whose rhyme scheme is events rather than words—a two-hour metaphor that says: life is like *this!* Therefore, a story must abstract from life to discover its essences, but not become an abstraction that loses all sense of life-as-lived. A story must be *like* life, but not so verbatim that it has no depth or meaning beyond what's obvious to everyone on the street.

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Robert McKee, *Story* (25)

INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Michael Berry in 2000, Hou Hsiao Hsien explained that in making his Taiwanese trilogy, *City of Sadness*, its prequel *The Puppetmaster*, and *Good Men, Good Women* he was confronting Taiwanese history at three important periods of its development: “*The Puppetmaster* actually takes place before the events depicted in *City of Sadness*, reflecting primarily upon the period of Japanese occupation. *Good Men, Good Women*, on the other hand, is set after *City of Sadness* and depicts the era of the White Terror. So the trilogy is a portrait of modern Taiwanese history from three distinct angles. But although the backdrop changes for each film, the primary focus is on the depiction of the lives of the characters” (Berry 700). Hou described the impact of puppetmasters on his own childhood, and subsequently on him as a storyteller. “When we were children, we watched a lot of stage performances, especially hand puppet and shadow puppet shows. And then there were knight-errant novels [wuxia xiaoshuo]; ever since I was a child, I started reading volumes of these

knight-errant novels, as well as all those works of premodern vernacular fiction. But of all these genres—puppet shows, knight-errant fiction, etc.—they all fall under the umbrella of popular or folk entertainment. So in the beginning you start to imagine doing something different within these limits. The whole process is unconscious, so when you first come face to face with the medium of film, you naturally incorporate aspects of the novels, plays, and films that you had come in contact with in the past into your own work” (Berry 684).

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Throughout *The Puppetmaster* Hou includes references to the oral traditions of story-telling, the imitation of the master in the recitation of poetry in the classroom, songs in the puppet shows, and even in private rooms we see and hear folk songs accompanied by an urhu, a traditional Chinese stringed instrument. As June Yip has noticed, there are traces of Japanese influence throughout the film: “here and there a Japanese word or phrase slips into the dialogue, a casual comment is made about a visit to a Japanese doctor, a Japanese song is heard on the sound track, or a Japanese-style house appears on the screen” (154). The tension of the Japanese and Taiwanese relationship is conveyed at every level, but Hou Hsiao Hsien’s film seems, at the fundamental, human level, to be less engaged with conveying the impact of the Japanese on Taiwan than with conveying the impact of Taiwan on the Japanese. *The Puppetmaster* sounds its entrance with the distinctive cymbals of Peking Opera as the intertitle reveals the historical context, that of the Japanese occupation of Taiwan between 1895 and 1945: “1895, China loses the war and signs the Treaty of Shimonoseki, ceding Taiwan and the Pescadores to Japan. Thus, Japan ruled Taiwan for fifty years, until World War II.” This tension between what is distinctively Chinese and what is distinctively Japanese existing in one space is masterfully conveyed in a verbal-visual clash in this first moment of the film.

Many of the residents in Taiwan had already fled China in the 1940s, Hou’s family among them, whilst others, Chinese military, found themselves trapped in Taiwan. Stories abound of Chinese officers who had little option but to forget about their families in mainland China and make a life in Taiwan. However, Hou Hsiao Hsien does not use *The Puppetmaster* to relate those private tragedies, instead he shows the ‘Taiwanese’ as strong, resilient and clearly a force to be reckoned with, sustained by the strength of their oral folk culture even as they bend to their colonial masters. What is most fascinating about Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s film is the extent to which he reflects the hardship endured by the Japanese military who were sent to Taiwan to colonise, or Japanize, an island in which they are feared, hated and alienated, for whom returning ‘home’ is an impossibility.

Hou has a distinctive style of filming, of using auto/biographical sketches as outlines for his minimalistic, impressionistic, gestural brush-strokes and long-shot landscape colouring even to convey what should be private moments, yet in spite of all of these interventions he doesn’t regard *The Puppetmaster* as an adaptation because he didn’t have a hand in transcribing the interviews with Li Tienlu, but simply used the material as it stood. Although the individual narratives appear only

tangentially related, the master storyteller Li Tienlu has a clear sense of an overarching story structure in which he is the protagonist and hero.

How much of what he says happened is factually correct is largely beside the point. There are some historically factual reference points which help to establish the political landscape, but these are not essential in understanding the story he has to tell. Robert McKee argues that “The weakest possible excuse to include anything in a story is: ‘But it actually happened.’ Everything happens; everything imaginable happens. Indeed, the unimaginable happens. But story is not life in actuality. Mere occurrence brings us nowhere near the truth. What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we *think about* what happens” (25). In *The Puppetmaster*, Hou Hsiao Hsien employs a master story-teller—a puppet master to create a sense of self within a created story that is life-like. Tienlu tells us himself that when he created his puppet troupe master Fu named it ‘Also like life.’ He explains: “Puppets in performances are like people. So puppet plays are also like life”. Hou emphasises this relationship between art and life throughout the film across the spectrum of performance, from Li Tienlu speaking directly to the camera in different spatial contexts, to his hand in a puppet glove, as we see his back-stage performance, to the puppet shows as seen by his audience, to live actors performing puppet theatre as puppets and finally, opera, all of which take place within the collective framework in which a cast largely composed of non-actors act their roles in Tienlu’s artistic reinvention of his life-story, his ultimate puppet show.

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LIFE, DEATH AND SEPARATION

As Li Tienlu begins to recount his life from the moment of his birth he participates in a tradition of oral story-telling. The familial collective memory is passed on to him to make meaning out of. Tienlu’s nativity story tells him in a very real sense who he is and how his life will proceed. He tells us that “My maternal grandparents who went by the ancient traditions took me to a fortune-teller who said my fortune was a tough one. To change things, I had to change the way I called my parents.” The grandparents are told that Tienlu must call his mother and father aunty and uncle. He says: “That’s how we did things in the old days through the advice of fortune tellers.” We are also told of the fight over his naming. Because his father had married into his mother’s family, the first child also had to take her name. Tienlu tells us: “and that is how I was born.” He presents his life as having begun at the moment of his birth into society as a named subject Li Teinlu, but it is a society from which he is already, ironically, doubly alienated. Even at this early stage Hou introduces the question of what constitutes home. Tienlu tells us that “to speak of life, the hardest things are separation and death.” Although we see him confronting separation and death throughout the film, we never see him grieving or despairing.

Tienlu tells the story of his mother dying when he was eight years old. His mother was so distraught by the critical condition of his grandmother that she prayed to the gods to take her life instead. Tienlu acknowledges that this might appear to be superstitious, but he explains that as his grandmother improved his mother became critically ill and died. With this event, the realization that life and death are negotiable when understood within the framework of story becomes a powerful element in Tienlu's life as he becomes a master of story himself.

June Yip argues that "despite the politically significant historical markers that open the film, *The Puppetmaster* deliberately pushes public history far into the background. Even more than *City of Sadness*, it valorizes the apolitical lives of the common masses by refracting major political events through the limited consciousnesses of ordinary people" (153). Throughout the film, however, Hou symbolically connects the ordinary with the extraordinary, the political event with the domestic incident and, of course, the three distinct, but Venn-like, spaces in which each of the story elements are told, those of the public, the private and the puppet worlds. For instance, Hou includes a scene in which Tienlu is told off by his grandfather, Ahui, for stealing books from uncle Songling's house. His mother defends him by saying that "he's usually a good boy" and that "Uncle Tikiim's wife is responsible for this...she told him to take a hundred of them." It is clear to the audience that Tienlu has simply made a mistake, but he must be punished, nevertheless. His grandfather warns Tienlu of the dangers of mindless obedience: "if someone told you to kill yourself, would you do it?" This scene is followed by one in which we see Tienlu waiting in a dark room for a beating that his mother will administer. But this beating takes a comic turn as she chases him around the room with a stick. This nurturing and admonishing role is developed later in the film in Tienlu's relationship with his Japanese colonizers in their caring and corrective roles. We see Tienlu punished, protected and provided for by the Japanese. His life as a puppet master is actually made possible by the Japanese, whilst those of many others are made impossible because of a ban on outdoor puppet shows.

Hou shows us plenty of domestic scenes in close, dark corners of houses. Taiwanese houses are traditionally very dark spaces that lend themselves to Hou's depiction of Tienlu's oppressive domestic arrangements with his step-mother and his father. We see him returning from a fight with a bloody nose. He sits out of view for most of the scene on an upper stair. We observe his angry father scooping rice into his mouth and intermittently demanding to know: "Who did you fight with?" Tienlu doesn't answer and his father leaves. Whereas in the earlier scene we observed the mother, nurturing, defending and correcting the boy, here the step-mother is defined by indifference to him. Tienlu smashes a bowl and leaves home to the sound of his stepmother shouting: "Don't you ever come back."

Immediately we see him in a puppet show, in which the protagonist tells of his nostalgia for home. Hou ironically juxtaposes the imagined home with the reality of Tienlu's miserable home-life: "One day away from home feels like a hundred.

Like a wild duck, I'm lost in the forest. Although the scenery here is lovely, nostalgic thoughts of home tug at my heart." Tienlu then tells us in a voice-over that his "was a pitiable childhood" until Mr. Li recognized his theatrical talent. However, as a puppetmaster, Tienlu has no fixed space. Having left home, he is consigned to a life on the road. His grandmother experiences a similarly unsettled lifestyle, largely on account of a series of unhappy coincidences that result in her being considered the bringer of death to her extended family. Li Tienlu recounts the sudden deaths of each of the relatives who take in grandma. When she turns up on Mangdang's, Tienlu's father's, doorstep, he tells Tienlu he doesn't need to send his money to him anymore, as long as he looks after his grandma. Tienlu agrees to the arrangement, and shortly after arriving grandma dies. In this rather humorous story Tienlu is told that he is lucky to have been born with protection from grandma.

The next great event of Tienlu's life is his marriage. As the marriage broker tells Tienlu's father of the possible match between Tienlu and Onglai's daughter, the pain of dishonour at having had to marry into a wife's family is expressed by Mangdang in a threat to break Tienlu's legs should he do the same. Tienlu's step-mother reassures Mangdang that Tienlu "is a worthless kid". In spite of his objections, the marriage goes ahead. Hou's minimalist depiction of Tienlu's marriage in a long-shot of smoke from firecrackers, in what must be the cheapest Chinese wedding on film, is quickly followed by a minimalist representation of the birth of his first child. We hear a woman, off-set, screaming, whilst another rushes up the centre of the courtyard with a pail of water, a servant waters a garden and takes an offering of two fish from a visitor. In contrast to this minimal depiction of family life, a third of Tienlu's life-story is taken up with a prostitute, Leitzu.

Tienlu tells us that "The Marco Polo bridge incident happened. Three years after the incident that started the war Japan appointed a new governor of Taiwan. In that year all outdoor plays were banned. In Taiwan's theatrical world there were thousands of puppeteers and their families lost their livelihoods. Later, a friend of mine called 'Black Dog' Lao organized a Taiwanese opera troupe called 'Red Jade'. I joined them and went south to Taichung. We performed indoors, at the Happy State Theatre...In the daytime we performed 'The Birth of Tripitaka' at night, we played 'Five Swordsmen Destroy Dragon Lake Temple.' That was an action play with lots of fighting. As for Tripitaka, it was a tragic play."

It was during his time in Taichung that he had met Leitzu. She had turned up to the theatre with a friend and the two of them stood smoking in the doorway, but these were no ordinary cigarettes: "She'd gone all the way to Taipei to buy several cartons of Silasaki". He notes how the girl "looked smart, smoking there." She asked him if he would like to try one and she threw a whole packet onto the little table at the entrance. He notes Leitzu was "a very generous woman". Of all of the instances of generosity that we see Leitzu performing this is the one that lodges in Tienlu's memory and which synecdochically defines her as generous. In the scene immediately following this we see Leitzu sitting for the photographer who orders her to "Look this way,

smile, don't move", echoing the earlier commandments by the Japanese officers to cut off the pigtails as part of the Japanization programme. Hou immediately takes us to a small dark room in which Tienlu and Leitzu are sitting at a table. Tienlu looks at each of the photographs in turn before extracting them from their frames and tearing them up. Leitzu calmly asks: "Why are you tearing them up?" Tienlu simply replies: "I don't like them." Leitzu then begins tearing up photos till Tienlu rescues one: "This one isn't bad." He kisses it, she takes it from him and treasures it for a moment.

She tells him that she has to go to Taipei and we see him alone in his room. He is visited by another prostitute, Gimying, but in spite of her repeated attempts to get into his room he rejects her. The final knock of the door is that of Leitzu herself, closely followed by a group of girls with a feast. Gimying tells Tienlu: "It's a good job you didn't open the door. If you had, our brooms were aimed at you, but you have proved you're faithful to our sister." He is angry with Leitzu: "How dare you test me." Throughout the film resistance is demonstrated, not toward the Japanese, but in these domestic relationships between the Taiwanese themselves.

In spite of the fact that he never mentions his feelings toward Leitzu, Hou leaves us in little doubt about his love for her. Tienlu relates a story of how he nursed her through the night when she contracted a poisonous sore on her lip: "Her face was so swollen it looked like a pig's head." He explains in great detail how throughout that night he had applied frogs to Leitzu's face, which "had swollen up so much her eyes had disappeared." Only after she was out of danger did he leave her side. The girls tell Leitzu that Tienlu had saved her life and he relates that they grew very close after that incident. Tienlu recalls the hardships that everyone suffered. He notes that "Leitzu was very much in love with me" but that since he already had a family he had to give her up: "they say a man can't carry one chicken and expect two to cluck so I went home to Taipei." Leitzu may be the love of his life but home is where the wife is.

Hou cuts to a long shot of what we understand to be a funeral parade crossing a bridge. We hear bugle music and the recitation of a eulogy to Dokisan:

The remains of Dokisan, radio operator for the Japanese army, come back to his native Taiwanese village. During his precious limited life he fought for the prosperity of the Japanese empire and for world peace. He sacrificed his life and fulfilled his mission. His death is like the falling of cherry blossoms in the morning sun. A valued citizen of the Japanese empire in death, he becomes a Japanese spirit. The name of Dokisan lives with the glory of the Japanese empire for ever and ever. May you rest in peace now, Dokisan.

Hou juxtaposes this shot with the back of the puppet stand. Gradually we realize that this is in fact a puppet show about Dokisan. It is a deliberate fusing of art and life. We hear Dokisan being told that the Japanese have to cut American communications. "Are you afraid?" one of the Japanese soldiers says to him. Dokisan replies: "Taiwan is part of Japan. We are now citizens of the Japanese Empire to ensure victory for Japan. Even if I die, I die as a Japanese spirit. It is such a joy, how could I be afraid?" Dokisan, the heroic radio operator who gives his life up for Japan, is Taiwanese, but his act of heroism actually makes the fearful Japanese look bad. Dokisan willingly

trades his Taiwanese identity to become the superlative Japanese citizen whom the Japanese can then honour as one of their own. We are shown the final part of the show from the perspective of the audience before the camera zooms out to reveal the bright lights of the puppetshow and its puppet-sized audience in a much larger arena of a shadowy evening Taiwanese mountainscape.

With this show of an established ideal of Japanese honour, Hou juxtaposes Tienlu's story about being recruited for the Japanese propaganda troupe. He is sent to Hsindien, where according to the rules of the Japanization campaign, he is told: "your family will be given Japanese privileges and given rations accordingly. Your family's security will be ensured." Tienlu becomes an honorary Japanese, like Dokisan. At Hsindien he lives in military dormitories with the Japanese soldiers, but here he meets his nemesis, Kubota, a young Japanese soldier. We learn that his sister, whom he has left behind in Japan, has died and that he feels that he can never return home. We see him drunk and depressed in the mess. Tienlu has no sympathy for him whatsoever. The cook tries to explain to Tienlu that Kubota has been in Taiwan with the military for ten years: "Those who came with him are now on the front line in the south Pacific. He's the only one who wasn't transferred so he's depressed." Tienlu replies: "He's depressed because he's a lazy bum." Kubota asks Tienlu: "How come you're paid more than a Japanese officer? You can never escape the fact that you're a colonized islander. A third-class citizen. What do you have against me?"

The puppet show of Dokisan foreshadows the real example of Tienlu, the superlative Taiwanese Japanese citizen with the Japanese citizen alienated from Japan and its code of honour. The antagonism between the two men comes to a head when Kubota urinates on the road in front of women. Tienlu is disgusted by him and immediately engages Kubota in a fight. We cut to the police station, where Tienlu gives an honourable account of himself before the chief: "Mr. Kubota has filthy personal habits. He pissed on the road. He just pulled his pecker out and pissed. There were women present who were shocked at the sight. He gets drunk everyday. These are times of emergency. Sake is rationed and yet he gets drunk every day. Then he talks about how a colonized islander like me gets more than him. I'm a puppeteer, an artist, but what is he?" The chief dismisses Kubota in disgust. In that same moment Li Tienlu's son, Hong, is brought in for selling Ayu fish in the marketplace. The chief takes Tienlu and his son to the river and baits a hook. He decides that Tienlu's son had not caught the fish on purpose, and that the Ayu ate the bait accidentally. Through this friendly interpretation of the law Tienlu's family escapes punishment. We are told later at dinner that evening: "The chief was really good to Tienlu." Inevitably, this story of such noble fish eating worms is interpreted as a sign of things to come. One of the men suggests: "I think the Japanese are going home soon." He is told to shut up. "But we're at home," the man protests, naively. He is warned that "If someone's eavesdropping you'll get sent to the firing squad." Hou again foregrounds the tension that exists in a fused and confused Japanese and Taiwanese identity co-existing in debatable space.

The chief subsequently invites Tienlu to dinner, but even while the Japanese chief serves Tienlu personally, the status differential is evident. Tienlu kneels and keeps his head down as the chief begins by warning him, "Take care of yourself," and then tells him that Taiwan "is my second homeland. I am very fortunate to meet you here." In fact it is the chief's task to make Taiwan into a second Japan, but Hou creates a potent scene in which the colonizer is quite obviously lonely and alienated in this unrelenting Taiwanese culture. In this brief but fascinating scene with the colonizer and the colonized, the Japanese chief and the honorary Japanese Tienlu, we are reminded that it is one thing to be an alien in a foreign country; it is another to be an alien in one's own.

328 The Taiwanese are evacuated from Taipei but as they reach Aoli news arrives of the Japanese surrender. Tienlu's family is almost wiped out by a malaria attack and it takes him eight months to get the money together to return to Taipei. He tells us that when he does eventually return he has no money left to live on. He is invited to perform puppet shows but has to arrange for a bed to be provided during his malaria attacks. We see Tienlu being carried onto a bed in the middle of a puppet show before we cut to the final image of the film, that of the Taiwanese breaking up a plane. June Yip argues that this scene "is an eloquent reminder that for ordinary citizens, the dramas of public political history mean very little. They have no time to contemplate the significance of Japan's surrender or Taiwan's 'glorious liberation'; they are too busy with the everyday task of living" (156).

Hou gives us the scene in medium long-shot. We see three men swinging hammers onto what we are told is one of the sabotaged planes, whilst others tear at it. These ordinary heroes have now become subsumed into the natural landscape and appear rather like flies on a carcass. The political moment is transformed into a universal truth about the necessities of life and the inevitability of death as even the plane is recycled so that the Taiwanese can live.

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh argues that "The final shot of *The Puppetmaster* is confusing because its meaning is not inherent in the shot; what appears to be a postwar pastoral is really a religious and political ritual" (75). In his final monologue of the film, Tienlu explains that when he encountered this scene he asked: "Why are you dismantling these planes?" They said: 'where d'you think we got the money for your performances? It comes from this scrap metal. Our gods will answer all our prayers. That's why we've asked you to perform for them.' And that's the reason why Taiwan was finally liberated from Japan." Tienlu rounds off his life-story as the hero and saviour of Taiwan through the unlikely appeasement of the gods with his puppetshows. The film which began with the announcement of Japan's arrival in 1895 ends with its expulsion in 1945. Hou Hsiao Hsien encapsulates Li Tienlu's story within the fifty years of Japanese rule and ends the film with the word "Japan".

In his interview with Michael Berry, Hou Hsiao Hsien argued that "It's easy to give people labels like 'traitor to China,'...but Li Tienlu was *born* under the Japanese occupation. That was the only world he knew; under these kinds of circumstances,

it is very difficult for us to place moral judgments on his actions. So we attempted to take a very humanist perspective and look at his life from the standpoint of how society was at the time. We tried to be as objective as possible and narrate his story through the massive changes he witnessed in his lifetime" (Berry 700). The success of Hou Hsiao Hsien's film resides precisely in the created and sustained tension between the Japanese in Taiwan and the Taiwanese in a Japanized 'homeland'. Tienlu demonstrates that the past is past meaning and forever irrecoverable except through imaginings—collective memories expressed through a variety of collective frameworks that are ultimately determined by society's puppetmasters.

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