

# Taiwanese National Identity as Portrayed in Popular Culture:

*A Study of the Film Cape No. 7*

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## Introduction

In *La Dernière Classe*, Alphonse Daudet writes about the anguish felt by a French schoolboy attending his last French language class in Alsace-Lorraine. This story was written just after the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine following the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1)<sup>1</sup>. It ignited deep nationalist and anti-Prussian sentiments in France, which would shape foreign policy for the next quarter of a century. Daudet's written piece simultaneously expressed and shaped French nationalist sentiments. A Frenchman reading that story now would, to some degree, feel the same sense of loss felt by a Frenchman reading the story in 1900. Nationalism can clearly be transmitted through art. This paper will examine the extent to which art shapes nationalistic feelings, through a different medium, and in a different culture. *Cape No. 7*, a Taiwanese blockbuster, had nationalistic themes, and inspired an (albeit limited) discussion of what it means to be Taiwanese. Its popularity also illustrated a growing sense of national community, as people watched it because it was the 'Taiwanese' thing to do.

The choice of *Cape No. 7* as an analytical reference point should be explained, as Taiwan has been the subject of the entire New Cinema genre of film<sup>2</sup>. Unlike previous work on Taiwan, *Cape No. 7* was a light, accessible, and most importantly popular piece. Released in 2008, the film experienced the longest theatrical release in Taiwanese cinematic history, as well as the second highest box office sales next to *Titanic*.<sup>3</sup> Its humor and romance also made it appealing to the 18-30 year old demographic, both at home and abroad<sup>4</sup>. Even if film contains more serious and deep illustration of Taiwanese nationalist themes, as New Cinema arguably might, if it is not widely accessible or watched, it does not provoke serious discussion.

It is also essential to define nationalism, to the extent allowed by a short paper. As explained by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*, a nation can be thought of as an inherently limited and sovereign imagined community<sup>5</sup>. Limited membership suggests criteria for belonging—one can only belong to a nation after meeting certain conditions. As Taiwan is multiethnic and multilingual, membership must be based on alternative criteria. In *Cape No. 7*, nationalist themes will be defined as those discussing shared Taiwanese history or anxieties. Nationalist sentiment will be thought of as being emotionally affected by discussion of a shared past (history) and future (anxiety). Although these conditions are not as seemingly concrete as shared language or ethnicity, the factors causing one to feel that they belong to an imagined community are not as important as the sentiment of belonging.

## A Brief History of Taiwanese Nationalism and Film

The term 'Taiwanese Nationalist Sentiment' is in itself an amazing phrase. Its history has been characterized by diversity, the result of waves of immigration and years of colonialism under different rulers. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan actively tried to inject elements of its culture into Taiwan. They were particularly strict about controlling film content and production, making them in

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<sup>1</sup>Alsace-Lorraine: The Franco-Prussian War  
<http://histclo.com/Country/fran/reg/fr-alhfpw01.html> (Jan/10)

<sup>2</sup>Hou Hsiao Hsien > Biography – AllMovie  
<http://www.allmovie.com/artist/hou-hsiao-hsien-95029/bio> (Nov/09)

<sup>3</sup>176, Chiaoning Su. "Beyond South of the Border: A Textual Analysis of the Taiwanese Blockbuster *Cape No. 7*." *Asian Cinema*, 20: 1.

<sup>4</sup>After informally discussing the film with students, a junior member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kathy Kaihsin Chen), and younger shopkeepers/night market goers, I found that people both in Taiwan and their friends abroad had watched the film.

<sup>5</sup>7, Benedict Anderson

Japanese, with ethnically Japanese actors.<sup>6</sup> Films illustrated the behavior of good subjects and exhorted the wonders of Japanese rule.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese occupation was then followed by the KMT exodus from China to Taiwan in 1945, essentially replacing one wave of colonization with another<sup>8</sup>.

Prior to democratization, the Kuomintang (KMT) ruling party viewed Taiwan as a Chinese province that would eventually be re-united with the Mainland<sup>9</sup>. As such, the portrayal of Taiwanese nationalist sentiment, or even non-Chinese Taiwanese culture, was discouraged. Though they were initially tolerant of local film; they later tightened their grip over the industry, only allowing Mandarin Chinese language films<sup>10</sup>. The KMT would later make propaganda films which portrayed the behavior of 'ideal citizens' and glorified the government<sup>11</sup>. Film was therefore a way of communicating political ideas, even though most citizens opted for the alternative of watching entertainment oriented action and romance<sup>12</sup>. During this time, a sense of 'Taiwanese-ness' was mainly felt by minorities, as a result of their exclusion from the KMT agenda<sup>13</sup>. However, a nationalism that did not include the Chinese population can hardly be thought of as the essence of Taiwan. In any case, the patriotic sentiments expressed in *Cape No. 7* are more cosmopolitan.

Gradually, Taiwan grew artistically and politically self-aware, partially as a result of democratization and growing freedom of discourse in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> As a result, filmmakers addressed historical issues and cultural malaise in their work, leading to an era of "New Cinema". Through documentary style narratives, it addressed growing social anxieties, like rapid urbanization. Though notable directors of this movement achieved international acclaim, they were not domestically popular.<sup>15</sup> These films were characterized by a focus on serious subject matter, had long takes, non linear dialogue and a slow narrative pace—in other words, they were highly artistic and inaccessible to the average viewer.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to earlier propaganda films, however, they tried to meaningfully engage in the issues of Taiwanese identity and Taiwanese political history.

'New Cinema' also recognized the diversity of the Taiwanese population, particularly linguistically. Hakka Chinese, Taiwanese Amoy, and other local dialects were used in film, in addition to Mandarin Chinese.<sup>17</sup> Essentially these films marked the movement of Taiwanese Cinema from government sponsored propaganda, promoting a nationalist Chinese government, to films concerned with discussing Taiwan, its social issues, shared history, and therefore its identity. Though not popular themselves, 'New Cinema' arguably created a creative space in which more lighthearted popular films, like *Cape No. 7* could illustrate national identity, but without being overly preoccupied with it, so as to remain appealing to a wide audience.

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<sup>6</sup> Context II: Taiwanese Cinema

<http://cinemaspace.berkeley.edu/Papers/CityOfSadness/behind2.html> (Nov/09)

<sup>7</sup> 16, Davis, Darrel William and Yeh, Emilie Yueh-Yu. *Taiwanese Film Directors: A Treasure Island*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> 18, Davis, Darrel William and Yeh, Emilie Yueh Yu

<sup>9</sup> 302, Chang, Hui-Ching and Holt, Rich

<sup>10</sup> Taiwan Review: From a Magic Lantern

<sup>11</sup> Taiwan Review: From a Magic Lantern

<sup>12</sup> 18, Davis, Darrel William and Yeh, Emilie Yueh Yu

<sup>13</sup> 448, Dawley, Evan N. "The Question of Identity in Recent Scholarship on the History of Taiwan." *The China Quarterly*, 198, June 2009, 442–452

<sup>14</sup> Dancing Shadows of Film Exhibition: Taiwan and the Japanese Influence (Nov/09)

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr1100/jdfr11g.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Context II: The Taiwanese Cinema

<sup>16</sup> Context II: The Taiwanese Cinema

<sup>17</sup> Context II: The Taiwanese Cinema

The unpopularity of these films meant they did not shape Taiwanese identity. However, democratic politics were awakening a national consciousness in Taiwan—when former President Chen Shui-Bien was elected, he referred to his country as ‘Taiwan’ and his people as ‘Taiwanese’ in speeches, contrasting with the previously used ‘Republic of China on Taiwan’<sup>18</sup>. The discourse which became more widely popularized by *Cape No. 7* was therefore already relevant, suggesting that the film itself may not have been the cause of significant nationalist sentiment, but rather a convenient vehicle for its transmission.

### Taiwanese Themes in *Cape No. 7*

Rather than arguing for a set of ‘Taiwanese’ characteristics, *Cape No. 7* illustrates common history, shared anxiety, and mutual questions of identity. Common history is mainly illustrated through the film’s exploration of the Taiwanese relationship with Japan. The film takes place in two time periods—just after Japanese colonization, as they are being expelled in 1945; and the present. Shared history is emphasized by a juxtaposition of two romantic relationships, each between a Taiwanese and a Japanese person. The historical relationship is between a Japanese schoolteacher and his student, while the modern relationship is between the manager of a band for a summer festival in Hengchun, and one of the performers. The temporal linkage between relationships suggests a sense of imagined community<sup>19</sup>, underscored by the fact that both women are named Tomoko.

A creation of a common and acceptable historical narrative, irrespective of academic veracity, is an essential component of nationalism<sup>20</sup>. Both romantic relationships can be thought of as symbolic representations of the Taiwanese relationship with Japan. The past is glossed over—pressures of colonialism are de-emphasized and replaced by the appreciation gained by the Japanese for Taiwan<sup>21</sup>. Shared past is connected with shared future—through the present romantic relationship between the modern Tomoko and her Taiwanese lover A-ga, illustrating the complex feelings resulting from Taiwan and Japan’s unequal relationship. Tomoko is portrayed high maintenance and incomprehensible, but nevertheless captures A-ga’s heart. The volatile relationship nods to the shared Taiwanese anxiety of finding their place in the international order.

The encroachment of the local on the global is also illustrated. Part of the plot revolves around a summer festival in Hengchun. The organizers wish to have a Japanese pop singer perform, as they realize his popularity will increase revenue. The Chairman of the city worries that foreigners are taking opportunity from locals, and therefore wants the show to be headlined by homegrown musicians. The narrative describes a common anxiety faced by domestic residents of a country rapidly integrating into the international economy. The band is representative of Taiwan in that it is multilingual and multiethnic. Interestingly, the film illustrates that though these people have disparate backgrounds, they face similar issues. The concert organizers accuse the chairman of having an “us vs. them” attitude, and “ignoring the global village”. The chairman similarly refers to the group, and residents of the city, as ‘local’, rather than by their discrete ethnic identities.

However, the question of what it means to be Taiwanese is never properly addressed by the film. The process of forming the band could be analogous to the formation of Taiwanese cultural identity—the result is diverse, the process involves a number of false starts, and it incorporates

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<sup>18</sup> Chang, Hui-Ching and Holt, Rich 'Taiwan and ROC: A critical analysis of President Chen Shui-bien's construction of Taiwan identity in national speeches', *National Identities*, 11: 3, 301 — 330

<sup>19</sup> 7, Benedict Anderson

<sup>20</sup> 252, Sharon Chialan Wang

<sup>21</sup> 252, *ibid*

traditional Chinese and Aborigine instruments, representing traditional values.<sup>22</sup> A definite characterization of Taiwanese identity is never properly established, however.

Another shared anxiety addressed by the film is that of the consequences of rapid urbanization. The Chairman worries that young people moving to other, larger cities are unable to successfully compete or find jobs. A-ga's own failure to establish himself in Taipei, only finding his musical voice in Hengchun, only serves to strengthen the Chairman's argument. A-ga is not the only character to face failure in a bigger city. The Aboriginal band member faces the dissolution of his marriage as a result of his migration. The two relationships illustrate the mutual anxiety faced by all Taiwanese with respect to migratory urbanization, a major societal change. Shared experiences can create a sense of community, which can in turn translate into nationalist sentiment.

However, the film itself is still largely entertaining. As a piece, it portrays palatable short pieces of political and historical ideas. New Cinema, by contrast, was like a director's artistic thesis, expounding a director's philosophy to an audience. *Cape No. 7* fails to fully explain the Japanese relationship with Taiwan, to even partially explain the Chinese relationship with China, or to clearly define what it means to be Taiwanese. However, as the critic Lan Tsu-Wei explained, "[Taiwanese] view movies as entertainment, not as a lesson...young directors think their mission is to impart their philosophies to audiences, and audiences do not like this."<sup>23</sup> So, by keeping the tone light, the director Wei De-Sheng ensured that the film remained popular. However, the piece itself should be thought of as a spark igniting discussion on Taiwanese identity, rather than as a definitive answer to the question of exactly what that is.

#### Nationalist Buzz Caused by *Cape No. 7*

Informal discussion of *Cape No. 7* with Taiwanese people suggested that many found the film itself decent, but not great. Its plot, characters, and actors were adequately entertaining. Nevertheless, it inspired enormous box office revenue, and more important to this paper, various discussions on what it meant to be Taiwanese<sup>24</sup>, how the Taiwanese related to Japan<sup>25</sup>, how they should relate to Japan<sup>26</sup>, and most importantly, what it means to be Taiwanese. These discussions of how Taiwan should be defined and how it should relate to other countries are in themselves evidence of growing national sentiment and community.

The film was also marketed in a way that suggested a growing national community. Initially, New Cinema directors like Hou Hsiao-Hsien publically endorsed it<sup>27</sup>. On some level this helped tie the film thematically to the ideas discussed by New Cinema. Hou Hsiao-Hsien's endorsement no doubt lent the film some intellectual weight, in addition to piquing people's curiosity in it. Major celebrities, TV variety show announcers, and even high ranking officials added to the discourse, each endorsing the film<sup>28</sup>. That local Taiwanese heavyweights were the result of the initial interest in the film also illustrates a degree of community—there are obviously leaders that stand out in every group, and command interest. The ability of people to instigate such interest therefore indicates a degree of community.

The chatter on the blogosphere and in media outlets both preceding and following the release of the film, whether critical or laudatory was also telling. Critics and bloggers discussed Taiwanese

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<sup>22</sup> 185, Chiaoning Su

<sup>23</sup> 180, Chiaoning Su

<sup>24</sup> 249, Sharon

<sup>25</sup> 183, Chiaoning Su

<sup>26</sup> 183, Chiaoning Su

<sup>27</sup> 189, Hong-Chi Shiau

<sup>28</sup> 189, Hong-Chi Shiau

national issues and the quality of the film itself. The film was repeatedly described as ‘authentically Taiwanese,’<sup>29</sup> and watching it was something a ‘true Taiwanese should do’<sup>30</sup>. Both the fact that the film’s selling point was essentially its ‘Taiwanese-ness’, and that such a concept even existed suggest a growing sense of self-awareness and cultural pride in the country itself. Although the discussion of Taiwan’s identity is far from complete in the film, that it was continued outside of the movie theatre suggests that it was in fact a phenomenon. However, it is arguable whether or not the film was the cause of the discussion, or simply correctly predicted anxieties and conceptions of identity that the Taiwanese people wanted to discuss.

### The Impact of Business on Film

Whether or not film can become a medium that sustainably transmits ideas of national identity is still questionable. Films that address what Taiwan is, and the issues faced by Taiwanese people have to be more than just profitable, they have to be more profitable than other films that could be made with Taiwanese money. In our talks with government officials in Taiwan, we discovered that one of the results of the Taiwan-China trade pact will be that the Chinese market will be accessible to Taiwanese filmmakers. However, they are at least uninterested in, and at most threatened by, films concerning Taiwanese national identity. More than that, they want cheap serials with mainly Chinese actors. Given that, like any market, there are scarce resources to make films, it makes sense that business owners will pick the option with the highest reward. As the Chinese market for low quality entertainment offers a higher reward than the Taiwanese market for films on national identity, it seems like there will be a shift in resources away from Taiwanese film.

Also, going to the theatre is no longer the social experience it once was.<sup>31</sup> When Taiwan was a manufacturing base, blue collar workers tended to go to films together as a social outing. However, as there was a shift to white collar work, there was a shift in preferred social interaction. Now, instead of going to movies, people tend to gravitate to Karaoke or video games. The number of theatres has therefore declined, making it harder to see movies in general. Lakshmi Srinivas’ work on the nature of movie audiences has suggested that the quality of a film is not as important to audiences as how conveniently they can access the product.<sup>32</sup> Recovering from sustained reduced demand for Taiwanese films may not be as simple as producing another decent film, especially given that other markets are more lucrative.

Finally, investment in Taiwanese film is a risky business, as it has historically competed with both Hong Kong and Hollywood markets. Currently, Hollywood films are still the most popular in Taiwan, *Cape No. 7* being an anomaly.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Japanese and Korean cinema are becoming popular, making the Asian film market even more competitive.<sup>34</sup> Given that a solid market exists for Taiwanese serials, and a shaky market exists for Taiwanese identity films, it is likely that *Cape No. 7* will be the beginning and end of the discussion on nationalist sentiment in film.

### Conclusion

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<sup>29</sup> 189, Hong-Chi Shiau

<sup>30</sup> 181, Chiaoning Su

<sup>31</sup> 198, Hong Chi-Shiao

<sup>32</sup> 198, Hong Chi-Shiao

<sup>33</sup> 8, Davis, Darrel William and Yeh, Emilie Yueh Yu

<sup>34</sup> 180, Chiaoning Su

Although film itself will not be the medium through which national identity will be discussed in Taiwan, for a brief period it certainly was. *Cape No. 7* sparked a discussion of various issues plaguing the creation of Taiwan's national personality. That in itself suggested that a national community exists, even though it is not yet solidly defined. However, Taiwan has only recently been a description of cultural belonging to the island. It has spent a good part of recent history being the colony of one power or another, each trying to imprint its culture and identity on the people of the island. So the fact that Taiwanese people are asking themselves what it means to be Taiwanese suggests a paradigm shift to becoming an imagined community.

Art can reflect life, and in Taiwan's recent history, through New Cinema to *Cape No. 7* it has, by discussing Taiwanese national thoughts and anxieties. However, film is fundamentally a commercial enterprise, and investors will certainly want a product that is sure to sell. Given that a Mainland Chinese market exists for entertainment oriented movies, it is unlikely that Taiwanese film will be the medium through which Taiwan realizes itself as a nation.

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