
A Future Without China? Livelihood Issues in Ten Years Taiwan

By Timmy Chih-Ting Chen

Driven by the phenomenal success of Hong Kong's *Ten Years* (2015), the five-episode omnibus film *Ten Years Taiwan* (2018) cinematically envisions Taiwan's future in the year 2027 without acknowledging neighboring China's ultimate goal of unification, yet proves prophetic in terms of the conservative outcome of ten referendums and the success of the pro-Beijing KMT party in mayoral elections on November 24, 2018. Seemingly depoliticized and surprisingly devoid of the China factor, *Ten Years Taiwan* departs from its Hong Kong counterpart's anger and anxieties over the erosion of local culture by China's unkept promise of the "One Country, Two Systems" model, which was originally designed for Taiwan. Such avoidance may be symptomatic of self-censorship, conscious or unconscious, for fear of being boycotted by China. Admittedly, the five directors may coincidentally be more concerned with "livelihood issues" (*minsheng wenti*) such as nuclear waste disposal, air pollution, mistreatment of migrant workers, the outflow of talent from Taiwan, the north-south divide, low birthrate, same-sex marriage, and the feeling of being trapped economically and politically. However, the forest (China) and the trees (livelihood issues) are not mutually exclusive, but two sides of the same coin. If Hong Kong's *Ten Years* attributes all the local problems to China as the Other, *Ten Years Taiwan* is beset with uncertainty caused by livelihood issues, at once local and transnational, instead of a threatening China.

Amis director Lekal Sumi Cilangasan's "The Can of Anido" opens with the sound of wind and waves accompanying the indigenous singing by Maran, an elderly Yami man residing in Lanyu (Orchid Island). As a villager reminds him to take precautions against an imminent typhoon, Maran is framed in a long back shot contemplating the Pacific Ocean silently. The recurring oceanic shot functions like an external echo chamber reflecting the perceiver's mental state without dialogue. The serene shot of the sea belies the fear of future Fukushima-like nuclear crisis. As the typhoon is raging outside, Maran contemplates the antinuclear protest signs at home which bear witness to the Yami people's forced coexistence with nuclear waste disguised as fish cans since 1982. The next morning, Maran is stunned by the sight and sound of nuclear catastrophe: yellow cans washed on the shore and floating on the ocean to the ominous sound of nuclear warning siren, which turns out to be his nightmare. The episode comes full circle toward the end as a villager reminds Maran again to take precautions against the impending typhoon. The nuclear

warning siren goes off, nondiegetically, with the belated appearance of the segment's title above the beautiful sea. The Chinese title literally means "cans with evil spirits," referring to the indigenous belief that the yellow cans of nuclear waste stored on the island contain evil spirits. The soothing sound of wind and waves stands in stark contrast with the unsettling nondiegetic siren signifying environmental hazard. The screen goes black and we hear the indigenous singing with both Chinese and English subtitles in frame center. Maran is reticent throughout the segment which ends with this song about a sinister, toxic force invading the island, which brings sorrow to the islanders. The living nightmare of living with nuclear waste has haunted the marginalized Yami people and returned with a vengeance in the pro/anti-nuclear energy referendums last November. The pro-nuclear proposal won, not because Taiwanese are in favor of nuclear energy, but because the majority mistakenly believe it is cleaner than coal, thus reducing air pollution. Air pollution becomes a recurring theme also in the second segment "942" and the fourth segment "A Making-of."

If the first segment begins and ends with indigenous singing, Filipina-Taiwanese director Rina B. Tsou's segment "942" opens with nurse 942's offscreen female voice addressing Mr. Yeo Siew Hua. This cinephilic reference establishes intertextual connection between Singaporean director Yeo Siew Hua's second feature, *A Land Imagined* (2018), which won the Golden Leopard, and "942," exemplifying transnational solidarity and inter-Asian attention to marginalized migrant workers as *A Land Imagined* is concerned with the disappearance of a Chinese migrant worker and his friendship with a fellow Bangladeshi construction worker. The numerical form of address "942" is paradoxically both impersonal and personal. Director Tsou has told me in personal communication that "942" was her student number at school. "It sounds like 'It is me' (*jiushi wo*) in Mandarin and 'It is you' (*tō sī lí*) in Taiwanese Hokkien. When I had this mirroring destiny idea...I recalled this number and used it." The poster and the PA system in the hospital show that the year 2027 sees severe air pollution and the elderly stay at the lung protective center. The sci-fi space of an air duct appears before the title, bridging time and space, predetermined destiny and individual agency.

Nurse 942 (Alina Tsai) is in love with fellow female nurse 899. They live in a claustrophobic space in the hospital where air is unfiltered. They kiss each other passionately without wearing masks at the risk of inhaling toxic air. Working-class solidarity and lesbian intimacy characterize their relationship. Working abroad in Indonesia, nurse 942 is exploited, raped, and impregnated by her boss. She manages to capture a video of one of the multiple rapes on her phone, but during the press conference unsympathetic journalists and the shameless boss insinuate that all she wants is money. Her POV poor-quality rape video and the close-up of her

face during the press conference invite identification with the victim. As the title suggests, the abuse of migrant workers concerns you and me. The injustice she suffers is represented through sound design in which her shouting “I don’t want any fucking money” is silenced and suggested only by the subtitles and the sound of her breathing is foregrounded. As Nurse 942 escapes through the air duct, she sees at the end of the duct her younger self ten years ago in Taiwan as a high school student whose student number was 942. Her father raped and impregnated the Indonesian domestic caregiver who took care of her grandfather. Both nurse 942’s boss and her father are played by the same actor and both nurse 942 and the Indonesian caregiver have similar bruises on their cheeks, sealing their mirroring destiny. Disillusioned with Taiwan as a “ghost island” (*guidao*), she determines to leave Taiwan to work abroad after graduation, only to suffer the same destiny as the Indonesian migrant worker. The segment ends in the space of the air duct where the Indonesian caregiver struggles to escape. The mistreatment of migrant workers, the outflow of human resources, and air pollution are all topical livelihood issues in Taiwan. The rape of the Indonesian caregiver was based on a real case in Taiwan’s second-largest city, Taichung, in 2016. Air pollution has plagued the city so much that a KMT Taichung mayor was elected last November claiming that she could purify the air.

The third segment “Way Home” directed by Lu Po-shun opens with the sound of casting divining blocks (*pwah pwei*) symbolizing not so much religiosity as uncertainty over Taiwan’s future. With one question in mind, believers would cast divining blocks on the floor, and the result indicates the god’s answer. A recent Bloomberg headline “Foxconn’s Gou Runs for Taiwan President, Citing Message From Sea Goddess [Mazu]” demonstrates that seeking divine guidance is part and parcel of Taiwan’s everyday life experience. “Way Home” paints a nuanced picture of the north-south divide. Dong-yang refuses to follow the older members of his family who have left or are leaving his and director Lu’s hometown of Yunlin County in southern Taiwan to seek better job opportunities in Taipei. It is true that an outflow of population in southern Taiwan has been taking place, constituting “northern drifters” (*beipiao*) and resonating with the outflow of talent at the national level not only represented in “942” but also referenced in “Way Home” (“Our factory has moved to Vietnam”). The static camera at Dongyong’s home represents the household god’s POV. As the camera moves outdoors with Dong-yang and his younger half-brother, the handheld movement is free and fluid in music video style. Through the rambling camera movement, the audience experiences a vibrant local culture on the street: firecrackers, loud Mazu processions, and scantily clad women pole dancing on top of jeeps. Dong-yang and friends’ carefree motorcycle ride accompanied by Taiwanese electronic dance music reminds one of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) and explains his emotional

attachment to his hometown. They wander and play in an abandoned factory and on the beach before ending up in a magnificent yet deserted temple. Discontented with the divine message revealed by the divining blocks, Dong-yang leaves his brother behind and is later reconciled with him. The segment ends with his solo motorcycle ride into the night, the sound of casting divine blocks, a POV shot of the household god being removed by the family moving to Taipei, and an empty shot of the temple's facade in a tone of lyrical uncertainty.

Characterized by its lighthearted and satirical tone, woman director Hsieh Pei-ju's segment "A Making-of" stands out from the overall pessimism of the anthology. On the set of a commercial for Baby Shrimp Dumplings, CEO Chen seeks to revive the lost tradition of family reunion during Lunar New Year and insists on shooting with a real baby when it becomes a rarity because of Taiwan's extremely low birthrate, aging population, and air pollution. In 2018, Taiwan's birthrate was 7.56 per 1,000, hitting an eight-year low. Voters opposed same-sex marriage in the November referendum. Times have changed in 2027 and the gay couple in the commercial take center stage. To Chen, the baby symbolizes the hope and future of Taiwan and needs to be included as a token minority safeguarding family values. The artificial set, fake fragile baby dolls, direct address to the camera, and a make-believe happy family contribute to the sense of irretrievably disintegrated family values.

The final segment "The Sleep," directed by Malaysia-born, Taiwan-based filmmaker Lau Kek-huat, opens with an offscreen female voice looking for her missing cat Wan Wan while the radio is playing Taiwanese folk song "Longing for the Spring Breeze" composed by Teng Yu-hsien in 1933. Wan Wan is how mainland Chinese refers to Taiwan. Lau suggests that if we remove the radical "eye" from the Taiwanese Hokkien title "ㄟㄟ," we get "ㄟㄟ," meaning "people who are trapped." The final segment can thus be understood as a political allegory about searching for Taiwanese identity against historical amnesia and the economic and political isolation. The search for Wan Wan turns out to be Irene's dream induced by the Sleep System in a sci-fi scenario. There are David Lynchian moments of hysterical woman, grotesque man, hallucinating music, inexplicable blood, mood swing, protracted duration of self-aggression, and blurred boundary between dream and reality, which make the Sleep Center feel more like a mental hospital for insomniacs, or social misfits incapable of facing the reality of protesters on the street or the people in front of them. One is reminded of *2046* (2004) when Irene, wearing a pink wig, sleepwalks into a bedroom like a robot incapable of feeling. The segment comes full circle and ends with the tune of "Longing for the Spring Breeze" attending the symbolic aerial image of Irene drifting on a Taiwan-shaped boat with her cat Wan Wan, most likely in yet another dream sequence. The feeling of fatigue and frustration and the fear of

being trapped and historical amnesia give way to the tranquility of a sweet dream in the finale. Perhaps not coincidentally, *Ten Years Thailand* (2018) ends with Apichatpong Weerasethakul's segment "Song of the City," in which a man tries to sell a "Good Sleep Machine" to a woman. The state of insomnia becomes a metaphor for a nation anxious about its uncertain future.

Although China is never alluded to in *Ten Years Taiwan*, its conspicuous absence haunts every informed audience member in the viewing experience. Perhaps it is an intended omission which has nothing to do with self-censorship. Still, the significant "livelihood issues" can be better situated in the transnational circuit not only between Taiwan and Japan ("The Can of Anido"), Taiwan and Indonesia ("942"), Taiwan and Vietnam ("Way Home"), but also between Taiwan and China. No one knows whether Taiwanese will wake up from a sweet dream or a nightmare in ten years. But everyone should be exempt from the fear of expression and imagination.

Notes on Contributor

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