



THE FILMS OF EDWARD YANG: CONVERSATIONS WITH A FRIEND

A Confucian Confusion

A Confucian Confusion (Duli Shidai)

Director: Edward Yang

Production Companies: Atom Films,

Theatre Production

Executive Producer: David Sun

Producer: Yu Weiyen

Screenplay: Edward Yang

Photography: Arthur Wong Ngok-Tai, Zhang Zhan,

Longyu Li, Hong Wuxiu

Editor: Chen Bowen

Music: Antonio Lee

Cast:

Chen Xianqi (*Qiqi*)

Ni Shujun (*Molly*)

Wang Weiming (*Ming*)

Wang Zongzheng (*Akeem*)

Wang Yeming (*Birdy*)

Richie Li (*Feng*)

Danny Deng (*Larry*)

Yan Hongya (*Molly's brother-in-law*)

Chen Limei (*Molly's sister*)

Chen Yi-Wen (*Liren*)

Taiwan 1994

129 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

The Chinese title of *A Confucian Confusion*, Edward Yang's first comedy, is *Duli Shidai*, which means 'Time of Independence' and also means that it's calculated to raise government hackles in Taiwan. On the face of it, it connotes the desire to break free of social, professional and familial ties that currently preoccupies many Taiwanese; this phenomenon has its upside in, for example, the formation of independent film companies and its downside in a pervasive me-generation materialism and selfishness. But the title also invokes Taiwan's formerly illegal independence movement, which argues that the island should forget about reunification with China on either side's terms and go it alone. If Taiwan does ever declare independence in this sense, the People's Liberation Army will be swarming all over it next day, so it won't happen. But at least it's now possible to air the issue without being arrested. The film has nothing to say about this political movement as such, but the thrust of its argument is that Taiwanese-Chinese urgently need to rethink their relationship with China's traditional social structures – that is, with their Confucian roots.

Like all Yang's films, this one is built around characters. It's easy to see the work that Yang and his collaborators put into devising and developing their protagonists: large sliding doors at one end of Atom Films' open plan office double as marker boards, and on them are Yang's cartoon sketches of the eight main characters with detailed notes about their backgrounds, personal histories, dress-sense and temperaments. Obviously the characters take shape with particular actors in mind, but the conceptions are strong enough and clear enough in Yang's mind to trump all vagaries of casting. Before my first visit to the production, the central role of Molly, a rich kid looking for some way to occupy herself, has already been recast twice, both times necessitating a part reshoot of material in the can.

The plot into which these characters are stirred is complex and detailed, but never confusing because it is always meticulously logical. The film chronicles two-and-a-bit days in the lives of a dozen prototypical Taipei residents; the characters come from every conceivable social background, but most see themselves as upwardly mobile and their paths cross in offices, restaurants, bars and apartments that are irredeemably middle class. During the film's span several of these people go through crises. Five of them are fired or quit their jobs, and three long-standing relationships are strained to or past breaking point. Virtually everyone in the film has to question the future course of his or her life, at least fleetingly, and one struggling philosopher (the author of a book called *A Confucian Confusion*) experiences a personal epiphany when he's struck by a blindingly obvious truth. All of this is intended as social satire, and the main challenge facing Yang is to keep the characters credible and engaging while kicking the shit out of their pretensions.

Seeing *A Confucian Confusion* as a continuous whole for the first time reveals the scale of the production team's achievement. It's a movie that combines the social and psychological observation of Yang's other films with a freer and more spontaneous approach to emotion and character. And, in its exuberantly sardonic way, it adds up to an account of city life in the 90s more scathing than anything Yang has attempted before. It's as if the experience of working with a group of like-minded young people has emboldened him. Where the

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Taipei Story Qingmei Zhuma

Fri 7 Feb 20:30

The Terrorisers Kongbufenzi

Tue 11 Feb 18:10

A One and a Two... Yi Yi

Sun 16 Feb 15:15; Sun 2 Mar 18:15; Wed 5 Mar

18:40 (+ intro by season programmer Hyun Jin Cho)

Mahjong Majiang

Sat 22 Feb 18:10; Mon 17 Mar 20:30

A Confucian Confusion Duli Shidai

Sun 23 Feb 17:30; Tue 11 Mar 20:20

A Brighter Summer Day Guling Jie Shaonian

Sharen

Tue 4 Mar 18:10; Sat 8 Mar 11:50; Sun 9 Mar 16:30

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films *Taipei Story* and *The Terrorisers* were founded on his own acute perceptions of the rapid social changes going on around him, this feels more like a film caught up in the issues it lays bare. It has enough plot strands and back-story to keep a sitcom in business for several seasons; it even has a happy ending that feels fully justified by the twists and turns of the preceding two hours, yet still manages to play like a cheerfully cynical comment on our need for wish fulfilling happy endings.

Only two of the leading characters are overt caricatures, both of them men. One is the playwright Birdy, an outrageous phoney who tends to expand the number of roles for women in his plays to fit the number of aspiring actresses available to 'audition' for them. Birdy came to cultural prominence doing post-modern Taiwanese operas but is now attempting his first popular comedy. The film opens with his press conference about it, conducted on roller skates in which he fends off the suggestion that he's selling out with the comment: 'What's more democratic than the box office? Buying a ticket is like casting a vote.' The other caricature is the rich kid Akeem, heir to a business fortune just back from a deal-making trip to China. Gullible and none too smart, he has agreed to marry Molly – an arrangement that will cement a wished-for link between their wealthy families – but senses a certain lack of emotion. Trained by his business adviser Larry to think in concrete political terms, he describes their engagement in a way that betrays the anguish in his soul: 'Before we unify, like Taiwan and China, we agree a "One country-Two governments" formula: no cohabitation, no premarital sex and no fights. Then, after unification we'll stick to the principle "One country-Two systems"...'

If the whole film were pitched at that level of political satire, then Taiwan's newly liberal Government Information Office (the body responsible for domestic censorship and export licences) might well be giving Yang a lot of trouble. But fortunately, politics in Taiwan is still an essentially male preserve, and the film's female characters help guide the satire into other areas. Molly, for example, is at a loose end precisely because she's a woman: as a daughter, she has no real status in her family and is simply waiting to be married off to the appropriate husband. She has asserted her 'independence' by insisting that her fiancé Akeem fund her business, a PR company of a type unique to Taiwan, basically a front organisation for a commercial conglomerate, designed to promote corporate interests and assign sponsorships. This type of operation is known in Taiwan as 'Culture Company', an irony that resists translation. More easily grasped is the position of Molly's assistant Qiqi, a petite charmer with whom everyone falls in love at first sight. She has accordingly been snapped up to appear in commercials; the problem is that viewers remember her but not the product she's selling. Qiqi is conventionally happy, conventionally sincere and conventionally ambitious. So why, the film shows her asking herself, do other people insist on projecting their own problems onto the bland mask of her face?

None of these characters is based on an actual individual, but all of them are highly recognisable urban types, especially in Taipei. The key question in the months to come will be: to what extent will audiences beyond Taiwan relate to these characters and situations? The film will have an international distribution and so it probably won't be long before Yang finds out whether the syndromes he dissects are universal or purely local. My own guess is: universal.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, July 1994