



#### **A Time to Live and a Time to Die**

Tóngnián wangshi

Director: Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Production Company:

Central Motion Picture Corporation

Presented by: Hsü Hsin-chi

Executive Producers: Lin Teng-fei, Hsü Guo-lieng, Chao Chi-pin

Producers: Chang Hua-kun, Yue Wan-li

Assistant Directors: Hsü Hsiao-ming, Lao Chia-hua, Yang Li-in

Screenplay: Chu Tien-wen, Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Director of Photography: Mark Li Ping-pin

Lighting: Chen Fu-hsing

Editor: Wang Chi-yang

Assistant Editors: Chen Li-yü, Sung Fan-chen

Art Director: Lin Chung-wen

Costume Supervisor: Chu Ching-wen

Make-up: Chang Chin-fang

Music: Wu Chu-chu

Sound Recording: Hsin Chieng-cheng

Post-sync Director: Mei Fang

Sound Re-recording: Tu Tu-chih, Yang Ta-ching, Meng Chi-lieng

Cast:

Yu An-shun (*Ah-hsiao as a teenager*)

Tien Feng (*Fen-ming*)

Mei Fang (*mother*)

Tang Jü-yün (*grandmother*)

Hsiao Ai (*Hui-lan*)

Yan Sheng-hua (*Ah-chung*)

Chu Tung-hung (*Ah-chu*)

Hsin Shu-fen (*Wu Shu-mei*)

Chen Shu-fang (*Wu Shu-mei's mother*)

Lin Chung-wen (*Chun-ying*)

Hu Hsieng-ping (*teacher*)

Tao Te-chen (*Tao, middle school teacher*)

Chen Han-wen (*Tang Da-wei, gang leader*)

Chieng Pao-te (*'Cat'*)

Gao Chung-li (*relative*)

Chen Chi-chen (*Mrs Ye*)

Chang Ning (*'Ah Ha-gu', Ah-hsiao as a child*)

Luo Tse-chung, Luo Cheng-ye, Chang Chia-pao,

Luo Hsun-lin, Liu Guo-pin (*children*)

Hou Hsiao-Hsien (*narrator*)

Taiwan 1985

137 mins

Digital (restoration)

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AND  
SOUND**

#### **Myriad Voices: Reframing Taiwan New Cinema**

# **A Time to Live and a Time to Die**

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*A Summer at Grandpa's*, which Hou Hsiao-Hsien made in 1984, is his sunniest picture, a nostalgic recollection of a childhood that was very close, he says, to his own. It's his most Ozu-like film, with overtones of works like *Ohayo* and even of *Tokyo Story*. [The film] was a dress rehearsal for *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, which by common consent is Hou's first masterpiece. It is the ultimate nostalgic film, a lament for a world that was hard, but perhaps wiser and happier than modern times. Closely autobiographical in many respects (including the death of the young boy's mother from throat cancer at an early age), it has a maturity and a gravity that transcend his previous work.

Notionally a rites-of-passage story like so many other Taiwanese films, it goes beyond them to attempt a full-scale analysis of the origins of modern life on the island. It is the rural, personal and intimate counterpart of what *A City of Sadness* later achieves on the urban and political scale. The three deaths in the film – the father peacefully in a chair, the mother painfully of disease and the grandmother in squalor on a mat on the floor, rotting from the underside even before the family know she has died – are like a settling of accounts with the old Taiwan. With them pass the rustic life that Hou himself knew as a child and, by inference, the aspiration to go back to the mainland. When the father dies we learn that he would only buy bamboo furniture because he anticipated an imminent return and was persuaded only reluctantly to buy a sewing machine.

Grandma is even more adamant. She spends the whole picture thinking and talking about the great return and, as senility encroaches, it becomes her one topic of conversation. 'Where is the Mekong Bridge?' she asks a young shopgirl and gets a vacant stare in return. For the younger Taiwanese, the goals of the older generation are not merely irrelevant but incomprehensible. But grandma does make her last journey back to the mainland, if only in her mind. Her grandson leads her there down the dusty lanes of Taiwan, picking guavas from the roadside as they go. It is a poetic image of great power, crowned with the wonderful moment when grandma, wandering in mind but still in command of her senses, performs an impromptu juggling act with the guavas for her grandson.

In a film of many heart-wrenching scenes, two especially stand out – the 'requiem' in the form of a Chinese version of 'Silent Night' and the hypnotic shot three minutes and 42 seconds long in which the mother reminisces to her daughter about her own early married life. The effect is like exorcising ghosts, calling up the past one last time so that it may rest ever after in peace. And throughout the scene torrential rain pours steadily on the veranda outside – cleansing, washing away old sorrows.

Alan Stanbrook, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1990

#### **Hou Hsiao-Hsien on 'A Time to Live and a Time to Die'**

In *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, I wanted to get back to a one-to-one relationship between filmmaker and subject, much as I'd had in *The Sandwich Man*. 60-70% of the film is drawn directly from my own memories, the rest from

## Myriad Voices: Reframing Taiwan New Cinema

**Duckweed (aka Floating Weeds)** Fú píng  
Mon 31 Mar 17:45 (+ intro); Sat 19 Apr 17:55  
**In Our Time** Guang yin de gu shi  
Mon 31 Mar 20:55; Thu 3 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by  
Hyun Jin Cho, season curator)  
**Selected TV Documentaries from 1970s – 80s**  
+ intro

Fri 4 Apr 18:15

**The Boys from Fengkuei** Feng gui lai de ren  
Sat 5 Apr 15:15; Fri 11 Apr 20:45 (+ intro by director  
Chen Kun-hou); Wed 30 Apr 18:20

**The Sandwich Man** Er zi de da wan ou  
Sat 5 Apr 18:10; Sun 13 Apr 12:00

**Out of the Blue** Xiao ba ba de tian kong  
Sat 5 Apr 20:50; Thu 10 Apr 18:10 (+ Q&A with  
director Chen Kun-hou)

**Kuei-mei, a Woman** Wo zhe yang guo le yi sheng  
Sun 6 Apr 15:00; Thu 17 Apr 20:35

**Ah Fei**

Sun 6 Apr 18:20; Tue 15 Apr 20:45

**The Terrorisers** Kong bu fen zi  
Tue 8 Apr 20:50; Sat 19 Apr 20:50; Fri 25 Apr 20:50;  
Mon 28 Apr 18:10

**My Favorite Season** Zui xiang nian de ji jie  
Fri 11 Apr 18:00 (+ Q&A with director Chen  
Kun-hou); Mon 21 Apr 15:00

**Taiwan New Cinema Symposium**  
Sat 12 Apr 12:00

**Autumn Tempest** Luòshan feng  
Sat 12 Apr 17:50 (+ Q&A with director Huang  
Yu-shan); Sat 19 Apr 14:45

**Taipei Story** Qing mei zhu ma  
Sun 13 Apr 15:00; Mon 21 Apr 18:30;  
Wed 30 Apr 20:50

**A City of Sadness** Bei qing cheng shi  
Sun 13 Apr 17:50; Sat 26 Apr 17:20

**A Time to Live and a Time to Die**  
Tóngnián wangshi  
Mon 14 Apr 20:55; Sun 20 Apr 15:00

**This Love of Mine** Wo de ai  
Wed 16 Apr 20:40 (+ intro); Sun 20 Apr 18:20

**Strawman** Dao cao ren  
Fri 18 Apr 14:40; Thu 24 Apr 20:40

conversations with other members of my family and from research. Of course, the narrative isn't structured in terms of chronological autobiography. The strongest structuring elements are the three deaths; beyond those, it's structured in terms of memories and impressions. Both the family in the film and my own memories are essentially vehicles for the discussion with people of my generation of some things that *should* be discussed: the political and social predicament of those people in Taiwan who originally came from the Mainland. It's something that simply hasn't been talked about, least of all in films.

After I'd shot the film, but before I edited it, three images came together in my mind that helped me to rationalise what I was doing. First, a guy from Hong Kong told me how he used to make annual trips with his family to visit his old grandfather in Guangdong province. One year the grandfather took them all out to a mountain overlooking the sea. He clutched a compass in his hand and said: 'This is where I want to be buried'. I somehow made a mental connection between this faintly absurd scene and the man who carries a magnet everywhere to prospect for precious metal in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which I was reading at the time. And then I made the association of both images with my grandma and her road back to the Mainland. It struck me that all three images combined something fundamentally real with something surreal or absurd. I'd never thought of things in terms of the coexistence of the real and the surreal before. For me, this was a kind of conceptual breakthrough.

I suppose that many people in Taiwan must have thought that bringing up the question of our isolation from the Mainland was a touchy thing to do. It obviously is a delicate issue. But the very existence of the film proves that it *needn't* be touchy, which strikes me as useful. I guess the authorities let me do it because my other films have shown that I try to be sincere and that I don't have ulterior political motives.

Interview by Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 1988

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