

A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF DOCUMENTARY AND EXPERIMENTAL FILMS IN TAIWAN

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Modern documentary filmmaking on the Island of Taiwan can be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s when amateur 17.5mm, 9.5mm, and 8mm became popular among Taiwanese and Japanese social elites in Colonial Taiwan. Among all Taiwanese amateur filmmakers in the 1930s, DENG Nan-guang was the most prolific, winning many awards in Japan. Deng, a professional photographer trained in Tokyo, made a dozen films in the 1930s, among them, *The Fishing Trip* (1935) and *The Zoo* (1935?) which won an “Honorable” award in a festival held by the Japan 8mm Film Association in 1940. His *Sudden Shower* (1932?) is a short poem about the city during a sudden shower, reminiscent of Joris Ivens’s masterpiece, *Rain/Regen* (1929).

Few, if any, independent films were made from the mid-1930s to 1945, when Japan first engaged in war with China, and later with Allied Forces during the Second World War. After Japan surrendered in August 1945, the political situation upheaval, strict military rule, and poor economy prevented independent filmmaking to expand until the 1960s, when social and financial conditions greatly improved because of economic and military aid from the United States government.

The emergence of *A Morning in Taipei* (1964, directed by BAI Ching-zue) was a wonderful surprise to modern Taiwanese audiences, most of whom did not know the existence of such an early form of “city-symphony” documentary. More known in Taiwan was the first “cinéma vérité” documentary film, *Liu Pi-chia* (1965), followed by an experimental film, *The Mountain* (1966), both directed by Richard CHEN Yao-chi. Bai and Chen were the first-generation filmmakers graduated from film schools abroad; Bai from Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, and Chen from UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television in the U.S.

Chen Yao-chi’s influence on local filmmakers was significant, not only through his modernist-style films, but also his mid-1960s articles introducing cinéma vérité published in *Theatre* magazine, of which he was a Co-Editor. Under his influence, ZHUANG Ling, one of his editor colleagues, made *Life Continued* (1966) and *My New Born Baby* (1967), allegedly the first Taiwan “diary film” or “personal documentary”.

During that time, editors of *Theatre* magazine also produced experimental films and modern theater productions. None of these films or filmed theater productions survive today. However, scripts and critiques of their activities were published in magazines at

the time, so we can assess their achievements.

A new wave of documentary and experimental films emerged in Taiwan in late 1970s and early 1980s after the establishment of the government-sponsored Golden Harvest Awards, set up in 1978 to nourish a new generation of filmmakers in Taiwan and save the dying film industry.

Most documentary films produced in the 1980s and 1990s were committed social documentaries, due to social upheavals before and after the lifting of Martial Law in 1987. The "Green Team," a video camera team intending to found an alternative media, was established by a group of anti-government young filmmakers working side-by-side with the opposition political party. They made hundreds of documentary videos on various social and political issues between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s.

The lifting of Martial Law not only promoted political and social change in the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, but also unleashed creative power in the hearts and minds of young filmmakers who passionately involved themselves in making experimental films, such as those shown in this year's Ji.hlava International Documentary Film Festival. Many of these filmmakers, such as Hsiu-Ching WU, CHUNG Mong Hong, and Fong-Chi LAI, who were educated in film schools outside Taiwan, immersed themselves in Western experimental film traditions. They started a new wave of experimental filmmaking in the 1990s, but it was submerged in the new millennium, replaced by a video art movement heralded by fine-art departments in schools and museums in Taiwan, beginning in the mid-1980s and evolving very fast in the 1990s. YUAN Goang-Ming was among the earliest artists who made single-channel video art work and video sculpture in Taiwan.

Meanwhile, a new generation of documentary filmmakers, dissatisfied with traditional form and content of social documentaries, began to advocate the making of experimental documentaries in the late 1990s. This movement coincided with the establishment of the Taiwan International Documentary Festival in 1998. HUANG Ting-Fu is one such filmmaker who engaged in the making of experimental documentaries in the 1990s and 2000s. His *Floating Islands: 03:04* (2000) is one of the 35mm films in a series of twelve short experimental documentaries, collectively titled "Floating Islands", produced by Zero CHOU.

"Personal documentaries" have also become popular among young documentary filmmakers since the late 1990s, when the first graduate program was set up at Tainan National Institute of the Arts (TNNUA) to train professional documentary filmmakers. Many TNNUA students and graduates used the form of personal documentary to explore or attempt to solve personal and family problems. CHOU Yu-Hsin's *Avici*

epitomizes such a movement in Taiwan documentary film.

In the new *century*, a new trend emerged, the hybridization of documentary with video/digital art, which evolved simultaneously with the international documentary scene. Films screened in this year's program, directed by CHEN Chieh-jen, Chien-Chi CHANG, and YUAN Goang-Ming, are good examples. These films are shown both in documentary film festivals and art museums, in Taiwan and abroad.

Experimental films also made a comeback in the 2000s when Tony Chun-Hui WU, who was educated in American art schools, single-handedly revived the 8mm experimental film movement in Taiwan. His films, his classes in the film department at a Taipei university, as well as his advocacy of 8mm filmmaking and the screenings of new experimental films in Taiwan, strongly influence a new generation of filmmakers who experiment freely with hybridization of documentary, fiction, and animated films. LIN Tay-Jou, an experimental filmmaker trained in Great Britain during the 1990s, is representative of such hybridization. His earlier films, represented in the Ji.hlava Film Festival by *Afterimage* (1994), are mainly experimental, while his films made in the 21st Century, such as *The Willow River* (2006), move freely between fact, reenactment, semi-factual, and pure fiction.

This year's excellent Taiwan program has exhibited not only the historical development of Taiwan documentaries and experimental films over the past 80+ years, but the variety and diversity of content and forms, including the hybridization of documentary, experimental films, and video art. I would like to thank and congratulate the programming team of this year's Ji.hlava International Film Festival, and I look forward to hearing your comments.