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ARTICLE

Blood brotherhood and *bromance* in Taiwan cinema

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Abstract
The rejection of Mou Tun-fei's *End of Track* (late 1960s), an 'invisible' film, never distributed, proves to what extent the themes it tackled (homosexuality, class difference, nihilism) were taboo for an entire generation. *Banana Paradise* (1980s) deals with the way two brothers in arms survive by usurping the identity of deceased comrades and eventually living in a society in exile tainted by the memory of the continent. Finally, *Gf/Bf* (2000s) develops themes that were once censored (homosexuality, democratization) and which resurface through the lens of a love triangle. Despite their heterogeneity, these films allow us to draw a history of this fraternal relationship in ambiguous and dissonant contexts. Through three films from different periods, I trace the evolution over time of the representation of friendship between men, an evolution that reveals a 'paradigm shift' within Taiwanese society itself.

Keywords: Taiwan cinema; LGBTQ+; bromance; gender studies; film studies

Male friendship in Chinese culture has been extensively studied from the point of view of gender studies. While specialists do not hesitate to establish parallels with other cultures, several works highlight specificities of Chinese culture that would prompt specific variations of the performance of masculinity. In particular, Hinsch (2013) identifies the concepts of filial piety and honor as defining traits of Chinese masculinity, with countless variations throughout history. He cites Buddhist monk communities that transform traditional Confucian conceptions of social ties between men to establish a different conception of the male individual: hierarchies between monks would thus overlap with family relationships as they are conceived of in Confucian thought, and their bonds can become as authentic and important as blood ties. Within civil society, we might mention *jianghu,* a set of moral codes practiced by knights-errant and the underworld.

We will analyze male friendship in Taiwanese cinema, with a focus on one of its recurring motifs: the strong feeling of friendship that can slide into homoerotic

attraction (or *bromance*[1]) and the equally strong sense of responsibility that pushes a character to take charge of his friend's family and/or obligations when the latter is missing (due to death, departure, or other reasons). The resulting stories of blended families and friendships sketch out a 'different' community that can be studied from both political and aesthetic points of view. Three films shot in different periods will be considered to trace how the representation of friendship between men has evolved in a way that reveals a 'paradigm shift' (Lu 2018: 59) within Taiwanese society. While each story is a fictional reflection of the filmmakers' own drives, of their existential and intimate experiences, we will nevertheless observe that these plots of blood brothers that establish bonds outside 'legitimate' and official trajectories also reflect the political tribulations, intellectual debates, identity questioning, and geopolitical relations of their time.

A chronological overview will be followed; it does not claim to be exhaustive. We will focus on three of the most distinctive films for considering male friendship with homoerotic connotations. They are representative of their era, but they also radiate into other cultural settings. First to be discussed will be Mou Tun-fei's *The End of the Track* (1970), an invisible film that was never distributed, and whose rejection attests the extent to which the themes it addresses (homosexuality, class differences, nihilism) were taboo for an entire generation. We will then analyze Wang Tong's *Banana Paradise* (1989), which tells the story of two brothers-in-arms who survive by assuming the identities of deceased comrades and end up thriving in a society in exile plagued by the memory of the continent. Finally, we will examine Yang Yazhe's *Gf/Bf* (2012), which tackles formerly censored themes such as homosexuality and democratization through the lens of a love triangle.

Each story is unique. But they all share recurrent elements that are at the same symptomatic of the traumas of history and indications of how families take new shapes to cope with social changes. These films are about reconciliation on human, national, and even transnational scales. They address the possibility of intimate ties that are not necessarily by blood yet are entirely legitimate or viable. While many of these stories of friendship point to traumatic violence in the past, they also respond to these traumas with gestures of kindness and responsible attitudes. Thus, they reshape a society in which individuals can rewrite their identities, or support each other, without going through formal and official commitments such as marriage or adoption. Despite their heterogeneity, the originality of these films and their recurring themes make it possible for us to reconstruct a history of fraternal relationships in ambiguous and dissonant contexts. I would claim that, for their filmmakers, the theme of homoerotic male friendship ingrains all the tensions and hopes of their generation.

The End of the Track [跑道終點, 1970] by Mou Tun-fei

Yongsheng and Xiaotong are two high school students who spend all their time together, despite belonging to different social classes. When Yongsheng dies of a heart

[1]The term *bromance* was coined in the 1990s to designate an intense friendship between men, linked by a brotherly affection, with no particular mention of homosexual desire, which is both obvious and implicit. See DeAngelis (2014: 1).

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Figure 1. Yongsheng and Xiaotong on the margins of the world: a tête-à-tête mixing between innocence and sensuality. © Tapei Film Center.

attack, his guilt-ridden friend breaks away from his family to help the family of the deceased, who runs a small noodle stand.

The End of the Track was censored immediately upon release and remained invisible in its day. It only reappeared at the 2018 Yamagata Documentary Film Festival. Yet it is surprisingly ahead of its time, with its universe balanced between innocence and perversion that we would later find in the work of Tsai Ming-liang. In a short documentary (*The Mountain*, also exhumed in 2018), Mou Tun-fei declared he could not survive without filming. He filmed a first opus, *I Didn't Dare Tell You* [不敢跟你講, 1969] in Taiwan but, after *The End of the Track* was censored, he left for Hong Kong. There he would specialize in exploitation films, the most notorious of which are *Men Behind the Sun* [黑太陽731, 1988] (about Japanese labor camps in China, where horrific experiments were carried out on humans) and, even worse, the ultra-gory *Black Sun: The Nanking Massacre* [黑太陽: 南京大屠殺, 1995], which features a massacre scene recreated with extreme violence. *The End of the Track* is unquestionably his masterwork: it is a searing piece, a magnificent archival rediscovery, and a sad reminder of the lost opportunities for Taiwanese cinema during the White Terror. The work could potentially generate a new wave, in tune with what was going on in Japan, France, and Italy, among others. But it was too dark, too ambiguous, and pinpointed too many contradictions in Taiwanese society: repressed homosexuality, class differences, the cynicism of the Confucian bourgeoisie, death drives…

The friendship between the two boys is at the heart of the film. Their relationship is openly portrayed as homoerotic, either through cinematic language or through dialogues (Figure 1).

One of the initial sequences shows the two boys diving naked into a river and playing on the rocks. They make fun of each other; Xiaotong thinks his friend's buttocks are 'weirdly shaped', to which Yongsheng replies that Xiaotong should shut up, given

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his exaggeratedly long foreskin. This might sound like common bickering between friends: yet, never before such an open and assertive discourse on the sexed body had been heard in Taiwanese cinema – and it would not be heard until the 1990s. Visually, the look is also assertive. Mou Tun-fei frames the bodies of his young actors in a way that conveys the troubling sensation of blossoming desire. A case in point is the shot in which the camera is positioned on Yongsheng's back, while he is drying himself in the sun on a rock; his friend, filmed in a slightly low angle, emerges from the water to appear between his open legs in the foreground. This composition recalls the symbol-laden geometry of Nagisa Oshima (*Cruel Story of Youth* [青春残酷物語, 1960], *The Ceremony* [儀式, 1971]): bodies intertwine in settings created by the camera's angle or during editing. The images thus express the dynamics of desire and the relationships of force, submission, and attraction between the characters.

In another sequence, the two friends emerge from the sea to eat their *biandan*; the camera lingers at length on their pubescent bodies, drops of water trickling down their toned physiques. When Mou films them at school, he always frames his two protagonists as cut off from others, by themselves, in their own world. They are always alone – as in the very first sequence of the film, where we are plunged into darkness before distinguishing two luminous points approaching: the lamps of the two young boys emerging from an abandoned mine they have just explored. An interview with the actors[2] reveals that they were studying at the same school in the United States at the time and had returned to Taiwan for one summer to shoot this film – their one and only. They talk about their friendship in the foreign country, where, as neither of them spoke English well, they had naturally grown closer and thereby isolated from their classmates. Mou had found a certain similitude between his characters and his actors: two barely pubescent boys who established a privileged, insulated bond. Like the film's characters, the young actors felt isolated in a foreign land, and had forged an 'imaginary' community far from their homeland, something that bound them together but also set them apart from the others. Their community is fictional yet also real; the director uses their relationship, their sense of exclusion from the community, and the suffering caused by their uprooting and exile to bring to the screen a personal and psychological drama that is also symbolic of an entire generation – one that grew up in the clashing environment of a totalitarian regime that fostered American culture and politics, considered as the epitome of modernity, and at the same time required conformity to Confucian morality: hence, a generation whose ideology and morality could hardly find a place within the Nation, and needed instead to imagine newly blended bonds, complicities, and connivances.

Homoeroticism is not just hinted at. During a conversation, Xiaotong remarks 'A friend says we are homosexuals'; his friend asks, 'What does homosexual mean?' and threatens to bite him to transmit homosexuality – a common joke for children, who pretend that diseases, curses, or bad luck are contagious and can be virtually transmitted. The other replies, 'But aren't you afraid of his acne?' before changing the subject. Here, although casually mentioned in the interstices of a light conversation, Mou Tun-fei names what had hitherto only been suggested in cinematic language.

[2]See https://movie1314.pixnet.net/coblog/post/347516030-

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The two boys are constantly pushing their own limits: who will run the fastest, who will be the bravest in exploring the cave, who will fight the hardest… This will cost Yongsheng's life. The sublime sequence of his death transforms a tragic yet realistic event into a Dionysian dance. The two boys are alone on the racetrack; Xiaotong, seated in the middle, does his homework with his abacus, while Yongsheng runs around him, following the track. The editing unnoticeably speeds up, with shots and reverse shots of the two boys alternating with wider shots which show both characters in the frame. The sound remarkably accompanies this acceleration: the sound of the abacus balls becomes more and more heady, and gradually overlaps with a new sound, Yongsheng's heartbeat, which is also speeding up. Xiaotong's shouts of encouragement – 'Faster! Run faster! You're almost at the end of the track' (hence the title) – add to the scene. As in an amorous 'corrida' (recalling the original title of Oshima's *Realm of the Senses,* 愛のコリーダ), the two boys are shown alternately, the first shouting 'Run! Faster!', and the second increasingly out of breath, sweating, his heart racing, leaning towards his friend who keeps calling out to him with no sense of the gravity of the situation. Tension mounts until Yongsheng passes out in Xiaotong's arms and dies in a final embrace. The sequence is filmed with the solemnity of a mythological narrative and the tension of an erotic tale.

Here begins the film's second act, in which Xiaotong tries to atone for his 'crime'. Mou Tun-fei portrays a reflection on Taiwanese society that is at the same time universal and specific. The two boys belong to very different social classes: Yongsheng's parents struggle to make ends meet with their small noodle stand, while Xiaotong's are wealthy bourgeois. After his friend's death, Xiaotong devotes all of himself to helping Yongsheng's parents. Still sequences show the parents' slow acceptance of the young man who indirectly caused their son's death. Xiaotong's family, on the other hand, does not understand their son's attitude, and simply repeats the precepts of Confucian morality: respect for parents and teachers, commitment to his studies, the primacy of family over social life, and self-sacrifice. Contrary to these principles, Xiaotong's choice to replace his friend and fulfill his duties is a way of self-redemption. The conflict with his family brings to light the contradictions of the society of the time, emphasizing or, respectively, claiming the inadequacy of (some) individuals vis-à-vis official models. In a sequence of psychological violence unparalleled in Taiwanese cinema until the lifting of martial law, Xiaotong confronts his father, who reproaches him for his poor school performance. The father insists that he must 'help himself before helping others', whereupon the boy raises his voice and begins to recite his father's lessons like a broken machine. The individualistic, career-oriented morality of the parents, mimicked by a teenager full of hatred, must have been a bombshell for the censors of the time, who were not mistaken in spotting an extraordinarily well-targeted protest in Mou's work. Xiaotong's parodic monologue ends with the admission that 'Yongsheng deserved to die, he had it coming', not conforming to society's expectations. This cynical finale exposes the hypocrisies of Confucian capitalism. In a classic circular composition, the film ends where it began, at the abandoned mine from which the two boys emerged; but now Xiaotong is alone and descends into the darkness. This scene could be symbolically read as Xiaotong overcoming his fears, but also – as we are inclined to believe – as representing a form of self-annihilation, of suicide, the realization of a death drive that only his friend Yongsheng could restrain.

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The rediscovery of this nihilistic and hopeless film is in tune with the 'transitional justice' policy pursued by President Tsai Ing-wen since 2016. She was committed to reviving the voices repressed under martial law to redress the injustices of the totalitarian and liberticidal Guomindang regime. *The End of the Track* was a bombshell in the cinephile milieu, which is also part of this reappraisal of a local, autonomous, independent, rebellious, and plural culture – an expression of pluralism and multiculturalism that is critical for Taiwan's current questioning of identity politics.

Mou Tun-fei's voice was eventually lost in the ultraviolent fury of exploitation cinema. His tactics and themes would nonetheless resurface in Taiwanese cinema and particularly in Tsai Ming-liang. Tsai's first feature, *Rebels of the Neon God* [青少年哪吒, 1992], revisits the camaraderie that slides into homoerotic attraction among Taipei youth. This time, his voiceless, alienated heroes are confronted with the specter of AIDS, with repression of non-normative sexuality, and more generally depict contrasting, destructive relationships reminiscent of Fassbinder and Pasolini.

We saw in *The End of the Track* how friendship can build stronger bonds than blood, as the young protagonist identifies with his dead friend in an unaccomplished quest for existential meaning and in rejecting official conventions. In *Banana Paradise*, Wang Tong depicts Taiwan's history through the metaphor of 'false brothers' to illustrate the drama of exile and uprooting. He turns friendship into a survival strategy that overcomes the law by creating a fictional community stronger than reality.

Banana Paradise [香蕉天堂, 1989] by Wang Tong

Banana Paradise follows the story of Fu-kuei and Te-sheng over more than three decades, from 1948 to the 1980s. Both in the Guomindang army, the two friends face tremendous pitfalls once their battalion arrives in Taiwan. Te-sheng is accused of being a Communist spy and is tortured out of his mind. By a series of circumstances, the shy and awkward Fu-kuei will assume the identity of a dead soldier, which leads him to look after the family of the deceased while saving his friend by presenting him as his blood brother.

In this stronger-than-History friendship, war is the original trauma; exile from the motherland is a leitmotif; resourcefulness and camaraderie, more than politics or high ideals, are the values that carry men forward. While the father figure is the symbolic pivot of many New Cinema films[3], Wang Tong focuses on male friendship, and particularly on fraternal or *bromance* relationships[4]. We find no evidence of homoerotic connotations, but we do find a sense of mutual aid that transcends conventional as well as legal barriers. It was in Mou Tun-fei's work, and it will reappear in *Gf/Bf*. This story of *bromance* allows for a plurality of readings. On the one hand, it may represent the deep poetic significance of a bond born in the army and lasting for a lifetime; on the other, it may hint at Taiwan as a homeland where identities can change and be (re)shaped according to geopolitical constraints, somehow mocking Confucius' 'rectification of

[3]See, for example, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (童年往事, 1985); Wu Nien-jen's *A Borrowed Life* (多桑, 1994); Yang Dechang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (牯嶺街少年殺人事件, 1991).

[4]*Strawman* (稻草人, 1987) is the first part of his Taiwanese trilogy, followed by *Banana Paradise* and *Hill of No Return* (無言的山丘, 1992).

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names' (*zhengming* 正名)[5]. Wang Tong's underlying claim is that society must adapt to individuals, and not vice versa. To push the claim a bit further, what matters in the end are not the names (China or Taiwan, *waishengren* 外省人or *bendiren* 本地人, friends or brothers), but the individuals. It would then be possible to cut ties with the motherland and establish a new national community in Taiwan, although not without clashes and adjustments. The film was shot in 1989, immediately after the lifting of martial law, when Hou Hsiao-hsien (*A City of Sadness,* 悲情城市) depicts the tensions between native Taiwanese and mainlanders that led to the enactment of this law in 1947. It is therefore possible to publicly claim for other solutions than the reconquest of the mainland. It should be emphasized that Wang Tong's family was from mainland China, and that they arrived in Taiwan when he was a baby. The dichotomy between 'native Taiwanese' and 'mainlanders' has long divided the country – with administration, politics, and economy being actually controlled by mainlanders. This context has certainly nourished Wang's own vision. For lack of opportunity – or of desire, as for the characters – to return to the mainland, individuals may either yield to the authoritarian regime or slip through its the cracks, and thus rebuild a new community where official ties are false (unconsummated marriage, non-biological father), but where feelings make personal relationships concrete, real, and powerful.

The film opens with a conversation in the latrines of a military camp in China in 1948. Te-sheng overhears two comrades announcing that the army will soon be moved to Taiwan, the 'banana paradise'. As one has never seen a banana, the other explains that it looks like 'your willy'. We find here elements already observed in Mou Tun-fei: an animalistic awareness of the body, a vulgar and fraternal sexualization, and an overtly obscene tone, which might even ennoble sweat and other bodily functions. If the great masters of New Taiwanese Cinema (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang) are inspired by the French *Nouvelle vague* or Italian neo-realism, Wang Tong, a rather unknown director in the West, looks more to Italian comedy. Movies by Dino Risi, Vittorio De Sica, and Antonio Pietrangeli recount, often with smutty humor, the plight of 'down and dirty' characters in a country under American protection and economic aid that is moving from the end of WWII to economic boom – all this without forgetting to evoke identity conflicts, political shifts, and gender politics.

In the following scene, the two friends promise to take care of each other, as they swore to their parents. Their bond is born of a promise, forged by their sense of honor, and this promise is grounded in war, a trauma that will tear the Chinese world apart in 1949, with the separation – still unresolved and still prompting geopolitical tension – of the Republic of China from the People's Republic of China. It was a civil war: but not as much in Wang Tong's bittersweet reflection on human life and friendship. *Banana Paradise* uses black humor to denounce the absurdity of war and the interchangeability of banners for ordinary soldiers: Fu-kuei, a member of the army's theater troupe, often walks around in his stage clothes, a Communist uniform, which provokes comic misunderstandings. However, events take a more serious turn once the army arrives in Taiwan and they are unfairly suspected of Communist sympathies. Nothing that Te-sheng could say in his defense would save him: the disciplinary commission will

[5]For the link between the good government and the 'the rectification of names' in Confucius, see Siary & Vergnaud (1993: 65-66).

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torture him until he loses his wits. What began as a joke turns tragic in a paranoid environment that pervades the illiberal era of martial law.

The film's tone alternates between comedy and drama, and the balance between sympathy and haughtiness, between the sublime and the vulgar is so fragile that it begs the question of whether *Banana Paradise* looks down on its protagonists, or whether it offers a flamboyant portrait of the ordinary man's mind. Does it reflect the viewpoint of a privileged class that infantilizes the proletariat, or does it express a form of self-criticism and inclusion? Unable to save an educated soldier from tuberculosis, Fu-kuei takes his place to help his widow and her child. With her complicity and with the help of a small community of outcasts (prostitutes, traffickers), Fu-kuei assumes the identity of the dead soldier and pretends to be a civil servant, so that he can finally protect his friend, crippled and mentally broken by torture.

Together with the young widow and her son, the two men form a blended family, living together for decades. Several scenes subtly play on the paradoxes of this reality, which has become stronger than blood ties: having had sex with prostitutes, Fu-kuei contracts a venereal disease, and his 'wife' – who refuses to have any intimacy with him – dresses his wounds in a way that resembles a gesture of love. We also see Fu-kuei caring for the child as if he were his own son. Eventually, the two former soldiers will live their lives as biological brothers. Because he feels guilty for having brought him to Taiwan, Fu-kuei agrees to take full responsibility for his friend, right up to the end.

The film ends after an ellipsis of several years. Both characters are now elderly; Fu-kuei, who had been presented as a simpleton, has built his career as a petty civil servant on lies, but nonetheless managed to give his 'son' an education and a decent life to his family; by contrast, Te-sheng's condition has worsened: the man, once a big fellow full of energy, is sinking into his madness, becoming increasingly childish and capricious. Some particularly powerful sequences show him in the background through a frame within a frame. As the action unfolds in the main room, we see Te-sheng through the half-open door, covering the walls with childish drawings. When the camera zooms in, we notice anti-communist slogans and scenes of war. The civil war is still there, looming over modern Taiwanese society's consciousness, even if its cry is muffled by individualism and consumerism. In this film, Wang Tong depicts an alternative scenario than the fratricidal one, with a story of friendship in which two beings with no blood ties establish an ironclad alliance, born of sacrifice and deception but stronger than official ties. Is his story scoffing the state's populist, optimistic rhetoric? Or does it update imperial literary motifs such as those portrayed in Shi Nai'an's *Water Margin* (水滸傳), a celebration of knightly virtue and rebellion against unjust authority where the code of honor is the only law? In any case, here is an illustration of Robert Rosenstone's 'historical thinking' (2017) in which the film becomes historiography and proposes an interpretation of history as conceived by the director. By taking into account his own sensibility and the sense of the society in which he lives, the filmmaker can actually describe the experience of an entire generation.

The film's denouement is an admirable metaphor of reconciliation with the past. It provides relevant clues for reconstituting a national community, or any community at all. A montage of various newspaper headlines announcing the death of Chiang Kai-shek, the death of his son, and the lifting of martial law (1987) leads us to the epilogue. Relations with China have eased, and it is now possible to phone the mainland. In a comedy style (a variation of the Pink Panther theme song serves as background

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music), Fu-kuei is told that his (fake) son has found his paternal grandparents in China. His wife takes him into their bedroom. The camera freezes on her, framed by the closed door, and the music switches to dark synth tones. She reveals that she had been kidnapped and raped by bandits before being rescued by the learned soldier, who died of tuberculosis at the beginning of the film. No member of this blended family is related to those grandparents. They are all impostors – and even more so, they are all orphans. 'Orphan syndrome' is a recurrent theme in Taiwanese culture[6], except that here the director thwarts our expectations with deceptive orphans, almost all of whom have assumed someone else's identity. Yet there is nothing criminal about their imposture: on the contrary, this family is a powerful metaphor for nation-building. When Fu-kuei, surrounded by his family, finally talks on the phone to the father of the man whose identity he has taken, he bursts into tears, apologizing for not having been a good son. He cries as if he were speaking to his biological father at the news of his 'mother's' death. At that moment, fictional relationships become real; promises shift from one individual to another, but all care for each other and the bonds they forge are stronger than blood. The two men's friendship, born under the bombs of a civil war, becomes a real brotherhood forged by blood, pain, habit, and everyday life. We could read these relationships as a disenchanted vision of the delusional and empty nature of all relationships in general, or rather of the absurdity of national ideals that yield to the connivances, mutual aid, and friendship of ordinary people who survive in spite of all hardship. Fu-kuei's tears seem very sincere, though, and they symbolize those of an entire people who has broken ties with the motherland. But they are also decent tears because, as we have seen, these characters stood together by taking on a role with such conviction that it became their very essence. If Fu-kuei cries for the 'wrong' reasons, his sobs contain the dramas of the century; yet the film suggests a resilient vision of friendship and love and offers an alternative: holding hands and taking care of each other.

Gf/Bf [女朋友/男朋友, 2012] by Yang Ya-che

Gf/Bf encompasses the two aspects of male friendship that we have highlighted so far: homoerotic attraction and political metaphor. The film follows the trajectories of three friends, two boys (Chun-liang and Hsing-jen) and one girl (Mei-pao), from 1987 to today. The love triangle erupts when Chun-liang's homoerotic passion for his friend Hsing-jen comes to light.

From *The End of the Track* to *Gf/Bf*, we observe a clear shift in the representation of male friendship and its erotic connotations: while homosexuality and sexuality in general are mainly alluded to in 1970, they become explicit in 2012. Interestingly, the other dimension of these relationships remains unchanged – accepting the other and assuming responsibility to restructure the main character's existence. Here, Chun-liang, a lonely character frustrated by his unrequited love for his friend, adopts the friend's

[6]The term originates from Wu Zhuoliu's novel *Orphan of Asia* [アジアの孤 児/亞細亞的孤兒, 1945] which portrays the sufferings of a Taiwanese intellectual who grew up under Japanese occupation. The definition of national identity, multilingualism, the colonial and post-colonial situation, the struggles of intellectuals, memory, and exile are among the most recurrent themes in Taiwanese culture. References to Wu's work are therefore numerous. In the field of film studies, see Ma Sheng-mei (2009).

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two daughters and takes on the duties that this new fatherhood entails. The characters forming a heterosexual couple, on the other hand, prioritize their careers and live a professionally successful life, much to the detriment of their personal fulfillment. As in Mou's work, erotic desire does not lead to a family life between two men; rather, as with Wang Tong, we are dealing with a 'blended' family. Chung-liang will raise the two girls with love and devotion as if they were his own. Whether this is sacrifice or compensation is left for the audience to decide. Whichever the case, the director portrays yet another 'atypical' family, born of friendship and mutual assistance rather than social ties and constraints.

In the opening sequence, we witness a quiet 'rebellion'. It opens with a close-up of an iPhone, so that we know that the action is taking place 'nowadays'. This temporality will be later contrasted with the *low-fi* aesthetic of the flashbacks, where nostalgia is explicit. The iPhone is filming the flag raising ceremony at a high school. Suddenly, a young girl shouts 'We want to wear shorts!' and incites her classmates to chant the same slogan. Under the stunned gaze of their supervisors, the girls lift their skirts to reveal the shorts they are wearing underneath their uniform. Is this protest anticipating future revolts – like the 'Sunflower Movement' that broke out two years later – or is it just an expression of youthful romanticism – or both?

The long *flashback* that forms the rest of the film is introduced by a caption informing us that the action takes place in 1985, in Kaohsiung. An additional caption in English – it is assumed that local audiences would know – tells us that they were 'under martial law'. As the story unfolds, the three protagonists engage in demands ranging from the more 'serious' (e.g., illegal selling of progressive magazines such as *Ziyou, Minzhu*, and *Formosa*, or drawing graffiti calling for freedom of thought and expression) to the more 'futile' and enticing (hiding nude photos of women in the pages of official school magazines and asking for freedom of dress and hairstyle). Sentimental and sexual frustration felt by the young homosexual secretly in love with his best friend, is expressed in innocent, relieving 'orgies'. The part of the film set in the 1980s ends with when students disrupt the flag-raising ceremony using the school radio, throwing firecrackers, and distributing magazines with hardcore images. In another scene, students run around campus naked after classmates stole their underwear. This representation of student struggles might be considered a bit out of focus, perhaps following a trend of retro and vintage fashion (Neri 2016). Despite their involvement in diverse subversive activities, the three main characters are fully focused on their romantic entanglement and take little interest in politics.

Moving on to the 1990s, we witness an explosion of color (floral shirts, Nike shoes, Overlook Hotel wallpaper) and sexuality. Yang Yazhe shows Mei-pao and Hsin-jen making love during the Wild Lily Movement, while Chung-liang flirts with a plain-clothed policeman on the sidelines of the protest. Love and revolution intertwine in an inextricable knot, but neither quest seems to succeed. The cries of protest inflame love passion more than they raise social awareness. An example is the sequence showing Hsin-jen haranguing students from the top of the stairs of the National Theater: his speech ends with an exchange of enticing glances with Mei-pao, whom he by chance spotted in the crowd. Thus, the plot focuses on the characters' love affairs, identity concerns, and sexual repression. Their social and political engagement is, in the end, a side element.

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The diverse representations of male friendship in the films we have taken into account reveal the peculiar cultural traits of their society and their evolution over time. While *The End of the Track* remained invisible until 2018, *Gf/Bf* smashed the box office upon its release in 2012. No more cover-ups by then: two friends can be lovers, or at least express a feeling that goes beyond 'simple' friendship. As in other movies such as Leste Chen's *Eternal Summer* (盛夏光年, 2006), Chen Yinjung's *Formula 17* (十七歲的天空, 2004), or Yu Kan-ping's *Outcasts* (孽子, 1986), the love plot has no happy ending. Yet we find the same theme of a boy taking care of the other's family, as in Mou Tun-fei and Wang Tong, which goes as far as adoption in Yang Yazhe.

The second half of *Gf/Bf* is made of abrupt ellipses. Instead of sticking to a linear narrative, the plot proceeds with impressionistic scenes. The three characters meet up several times, and the tableaux give us a glimpse into the evolution of their relationship. Mei-pao and Hsin-jen continue their passionate love, but we understand that Hsin-jen has started a family elsewhere. Chun-liang now appears as a ghost between them, as in one of the film's most enigmatic sequences in which Mei-pao and Hsing-jen are having a torrid sex scene. A peculiar use of jump cut makes Chun-liang's body appear as interwoven with the other two, and even address Hsing-jen: 'I want you' he says, 'but what I want, you cannot give me'. Suddenly, Hsing-jen's face turns into Mei-pao's. This dreamlike scene represents the insoluble relationship of the three characters, who can no longer share and interact as they did when they were students – a time portrayed in the film as innocent, lively, and shared. In the following sequence, which contrasts with the previous one for its bluish and cold light, Mei-pao and Hsing-jen part ways at the airport, while Hsing-jen talks on the phone with, we imagine, his wife. So the bonds between the characters fall apart as the story moves on, while higher social status goes along with sentimental misery. The second half of the film retraces their unsuccessful attempts to rekindle their passion of yesteryear. Bacqw k in the present, the colors are warm and the atmosphere soothing. Chung-liang, who has renounced all sentimental life, flourishes in his role as a loving, devoted foster father to Hsing-jen's daughters, whose biological parents remain entangled in their own careers and affairs.

The film suggests that a different kind of family is possible, a few years before same-sex marriage became legal in Taiwan. *Gf/Bf* played a part in publicly advocating a value reconfiguration that challenged the status of biological paternity and, by extension, of the traditional Confucian system – as well as of the Catholic one, considering the role of Christian communities in Taiwan since Chiang Kai-shek's regime. As in *Banana Paradise*, biological parenthood is not essential and can be replaced by other kinds of blended families. These alternative families do not have a merely functional role; on the contrary, they are presented as valuable models for overcoming fratricidal wars, political and social tensions, and imposed social roles. Male friendships are portrayed as friendly or fraternal forms of love, which involve the beloved one as well as his offspring. They exalt mutual commitment and assumption of responsibility; and they overcome the ordinary definitions of friendship and love – a novel approach on the threshold of the new millennium.

Many other facets of male friendship could still be tackled. They include friendship bonds in the triads, where the values of righteousness, honor, and loyalty often exceed love affairs in intensity. But this peculiar film genre would require a separate examination. The scrutiny of three films – *The End of the Track* (late 1960s), *Banana Paradise*

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(1980s) and *Bf/Gf* (2000s) – unfolded a consistent shift in the representations of male friendship, particularly when they are at the margins of society. We moved from a friendship concealed as a secret passion set apart from the world, censored and used to resist Confucian authority, to possible family and political reconfigurations. These new communities have yet to be defined, but they are already in place. All these are, of course, changing paradigms: yet they are relevant when we consider the diversity and variety of Taiwanese cinema, and they are useful for studying the representations of friendship. As we have seen, authors may draw either on naturalistic observation or on literary tradition, but they have chosen this particular bond to tell stories and portray passions that are universal and at the same time ingrained in the social and political reality of their time.

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