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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 Reading Claire Shen Hsiu-chen gave me the impression several times of discovering a kindred spirit, so closely does the first part of her book confirm some of my analyses¹. Like her, I sought to scrutinise the Chinese pictorial and cosmological tradition in order to find the origins of Hou Hsiao-hsien's directing, which is both specific to an original author and rooted in Taiwanese history and tradition. We have read the same texts (those of François Chen, Noel Burch, Michel Chion and Yeh Yueh-Yu, and the anthology of writings about Hou published in the *Cahiers du cinéma*). We have been influenced by David Bordwell and Peggy Chiao Hsiung-ping, and have tackled the question of relations between Hou and Ozu, etc. It therefore comes as no surprise that this is the part of the work which seems to me the most fruitful, especially as there are still

relatively few of us who share this approach. If cinema is the art of showing the relations between the visible and the invisible—by framing (André Bazin), by what is outside the frame (Noel Burch, Gilles Deleuze), by the process of suture (Jean-Pierre Oudard), by the complex dialectic between the image and the soundtrack (Michel Chion)—, how can the relations between “the full and the empty” at the root of Chinese philosophy, painting and calligraphy/poetry produce, or at least inspire, a new form of directing which would be both resolutely modern (calling into question the principles of classic Hollywood cinema) and deeply Chinese ?²

- 2 Quoting beautiful examples of poetry (Ma Zhiyuan, Wang Wei, Du Fu), Claire Shen Hsiu-chen creates evocative concepts which mark out her quest for a film poetic which is common to Chinese film makers and even, at the end of the book, to other Asian film makers : “a waiting look”, “the rhythm of silence”, “the labyrinth space”, “the jade-image”, “the wave-image”.
- 3 The author traces the origin of her project back to a dream, and I find it particularly interesting that this dream of a pan-Chinese aesthetic is of Taiwanese inspiration. Incidentally, it is a pity that this point was not developed : a discussion of the crucial role of the Taiwanese producer of the two films discussed, Chiu Fu-sheng, would have made it possible. At the end of the 1990s, Chiu Fu-sheng nurtured that dream himself, and it was thus that his company, Era International, produced *The City of Pain* (1989) and *The Master of Marionettes* (1993) by Hou Hsiao-hsien, as well as *Wives and Concubines* (1991)³ and *Live !* (1994) by Zhang Yimou.
- 4 The (interesting) problems raised by Claire Shen Hsiu-chen’s approach do not stop there. As she implicitly recognises by devoting a more detailed analysis to Hou than to Zhang, in the former we are dealing with one of the most powerful and singular *auteurs* in contemporary world cinema, who has profoundly renewed its writing, while the latter is a film maker who has indeed made some beautiful films, but who belongs to the category of the “minor masters” : a maker of well-shot images and of (more or less) well structured plots, rather than a real creator. In parallel, the author ventures onto dangerous territory—that of a possible Orientalist interpretation of her theories—when she tries to compare Hou and Zhang’s aesthetic with that of the Korean Kim Ki-Duk and the Franco-Vietnamese Tran Anh Hung, both film makers who bluff and take the easy way out. Moreover, the question of the relations between Chinese culture(s) and Vietnamese or Korean culture is fascinating and complex, but requires more detailed development.
- 5 Yet Claire Shen Hsiu-chen’s book is important because it asks, without really answering it, the question of the relations between a cultural approach, and an approach based on an analysis of the directing, the style and the philosophy peculiar to a film maker. One of the dead ends the author has condemned herself to by joining together the two “poles” of Hou and Zhang is trying to divide between them certain aspects of the analysis made by François Chen of Chinese pictorial space : to Hou the inspiration, to Zhang the void, etc. Of course these notions are complementary (as the author reminds us), and the inspiration is what moves between the empty and the full, etc.—so the “division of labour” between the two film makers seems artificial.
- 6 Also to be regretted is the lack of a summary of the plots of the films, especially if one considers the large number of characters who appear in each of them. In order to be able to follow certain passages in the text on *Live !* and *The City of Pain*, I had, several times, to refer to my notes, to my writings or even to resort to the Internet. I am afraid

this omission will detract from the understanding of the book. Since she does not go into the details of the plots, Claire Shen Hsiu-chen, although she provides an exploration of silence, does not thoroughly analyse the structuring role played by the deafness of Weng-ching (Tony Leung Chiu-wai), the fourth son of the Lin family in *The City of Pain*, or the silence of Fengxia (Xie Tanhi), the daughter of Fugui (Ge You) and Jiazhen (Gong Li) in *Live!* In the same way, when she refers to the dialectic between light and shadow, she hardly mentions the most interesting aspects of the shadow puppet theatre which Fugui “inherits” after having gambled and lost everything. It is all the more unfortunate that the rooting of this form of theatre in the Chinese tradition—and the manner in which it reworks the aesthetic of the empty and the full, of shadow and light, of heaviness and lightness, how it creates and inhabits a space which is halfway between that of painting/calligraphy and that of film—is not discussed. It is one of the aspects where both film makers pursue a *de facto* dialogue : a year before *Live!*, Hou made *The Master of Marionettes* (produced by the very same Chiu Fu-sheng).

- 7 Claire Shen Hsiu-chen’s conclusion opens up promising possibilities. She puts forward the concept of “tearing”, and asks fruitful questions about the nature and the limitations of Chinese film stylistics. Let us hope she will pursue and go deeper into her research ; it will be a great pleasure to read it.

NOTES

1. Cf Bérénice Reynaud, *Hou Hsiao Hsien’s City of Sadness*, London, BFI, 2002.
2. Bérénice Reynaud is also the author of *Nouvelles Chines, nouveaux cinémas*, Paris, Editions *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1999.
3. Chiu Fu-sheng asked Hou Hsiao-hsien to be the “executive producer” of this film in order to provide a more “traditional”—which is to say more “Chinese”—reading of Chinese classics on patrician polygamy and the unique space of the family house, the *siheyuan*, with its wings set around a courtyard.