

4. Past Versus Present

EARLIER CHAPTERS DISCUSSED THE NARRATORIAL functions of contrasting the past and the present in literary representation. For instance, in “Three Sworn Brothers of Xizhuang,” Lin Shen-jing uses the contrast to highlight better, more harmonious ethnic relations, as opposed to an earlier time when misunderstanding and distrust wrecked the lives of the Taiwanese villagers and the nameless mainlander. Chen Yingzhen’s “The Mountain Road,” in contrast, privileges the past over the present in its condemnation of capitalism in Taiwan. Whether the past is rife with ethnic conflict and the present is free of tension, or the past is praised for political idealism and the present is censured for indulgence in material comfort, the contrast is manipulated to serve political ends or politicize the re-creation of a turbulent era.

After the lifting of martial law in 1987, members of the intellectual and political arenas were finally given an opportunity to look back and reflect on the period of suppression of dissent and protest. Consequently, changes in the political climate and cultural terrain have often resulted in a comparison of past and present. Some people lament the loss of innocence and political conviction, and others condemn the politicians’ exploitation of opposition movements for political capital. For instance, Hsu Hsiao-ming, who directed the movie *Heartbreak Island*, points out that “many people in our society have benefited politically and economically from the Formosa Incident” of 1979.¹ The question of whether the past can ever be completely recaptured and re-created in literary and cinematic texts continues to plague practitioners of both art forms. The concern over the demands placed on film directors and

audiences in the cinematic representation of the past is dramatized in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*, the third installment of his Taiwan trilogy. This chapter examines further the contrast between past and present and analyzes the ways of representing the White Terror on the screen. As Hou's and Hsu's films were adapted from literary texts, a comparative study of film and fiction further illuminates the complexities of narrating the oppressive White Terror era.

GOOD MEN, GOOD WOMEN

Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women* is partially based on Lan Bozhou's "Song of the Covered Wagon," which was analyzed in chapter 2. Lan's text adopts the form of personal testimony, having eyewitnesses speak directly to the reader about Zhong Haodong's life and following a roughly linear progression, from Zhong's birth in 1908 to his execution in 1950. In Hou Hsiao-hsien's cinematic rendition, personal testimony is replaced by a different narrative strategy: a film within a film. A movie is being made about the experiences of two real-life figures from Taiwan's past, Zhong Haodong and Jiang Biyu, played by the actress Liang Jing, whose own life also is divided into past and present. In her past (three years earlier), her boyfriend was shot to death while dancing with her in a nightclub. Liang Jing settled the gangland murder by accepting 3 million new Taiwan dollars. In her present, the anonymous person who stole her diary calls her on the telephone without speaking and faxes her portions of the diary concerning her relationship with her now deceased boyfriend. The film within a film is shot in black and white, and Liang Jing's life is done in color. Voice-overs describe Jiang Biyu's life, with Liang Jing as the narrator.

Hou Hsiao-hsien's strategy in *Good Men, Good Women* is an extension of his techniques in the first two films in the trilogy, which intentionally distance the audience from the events depicted on the screen. That is, between the first and third film, the trilogy increasingly emphasizes the untrustworthy nature of visual representation. Hou's second installment, *The Puppet Master* (*Ximeng rensheng*, 1993), tries to prevent the audience from identifying with the characters by having an actor, Lim Giong (Lin Qiang), play the puppet master, Li Tianlu, while Li himself speaks directly to the audience about his life. Such features keep the

audience aware of the artificiality of representation, for “transparent ‘documentation’ of historical ‘truth’ is impossible. Knowledge of the past is always subjective and fragmentary, shaped by the needs and concerns of the individual writing in the present moment.”² In *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou reaches the apogee of his distancing narrative style, applying a technique that is simultaneously self-referential and self-erasing. By showing the process of filmmaking and by framing the life story of Zhong Haodong and Jiang Biyu in film fragments, Hou forces the audience to confront the process of make-believe and cinematic artifice. That is, the movie constructs the stories of Jiang Biyu and Liang Jing while simultaneously deconstructing the process.

The final installment of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s Taiwan trilogy was originally to be set in contemporary (1990s) Taiwan, portraying a political prisoner’s difficulty in adjusting to post-martial law Taiwan upon his release. It was intended to contrast Taiwan’s past and present, as the film would conclude a trilogy covering the island’s history from Japanese colonization to post-martial law Taiwan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the original story line was later replaced by the life of Jiang Biyu and Zhong Haodong, as portrayed in Lan Bozhou’s “Song of the Covered Wagon,” although the contrast between past and present was preserved in the narrative technique of a film within a film. Consequently, as I have indicated, some people consider the film as criticism of the Taiwanese youths of the 1990s for their indulgence in material comfort, moral degeneration, and aimless lifestyles.³ But I argue that although plausible, such an interpretation is too narrowly teleological, for the director is not content merely to depict a clear-cut contrast. Instead, the most noticeable cinematic feature of *Good Men, Good Women*—layering the stories of Jiang Biyu and Zhong Haodong’s lives in China and Taiwan and Liang Jing’s past and present—is a narrative technique dramatizing the pernicious effects of the White Terror by exploring the ways the Taiwanese approach their past while raising questions about our knowledge of the past, both personal and national.

What Is the Past?

Unlike Lan Bozhou’s story, which covers the life of Zhong Haodong more or less in its entirety, Hou’s rendition uses the film within a film

to focus on Jiang and Zhong's life before their departure for China and the period immediately following their return to Taiwan. Obviously, although a film within a film cannot encompass the lifetime of a character, this narrative strategy is able to highlight the fragmentary nature of a quasi-biography. The filming allows us to see only snippets of the characters' lives; the juxtaposition of three time zones further enhances the discontinuity, while problematizing our knowledge of events. It also raises the question of how someone, film director or not, represents the past. As the following analysis shows, the issues of what one can know and how one recounts the past are contingent on each other and mutually implicated.

One scene that subtly but effectively tackles the impossibility of knowing the whole truth is of a discussion group session led by Zhong following his return to Taiwan, the one that most directly touches on the cause of his arrest. He concludes that the 2/28 Incident resulted from the landowners' exploitation of the tenant farmers rather than from a conflict between the Taiwanese and the newly arrived mainlanders. Whether or not his interpretation is accurate should not concern us here; instead, what is of interest is the filmmaker's oblique reference to the impossibility of understanding the past, either recent or distant. There is a sense of futility in Zhong's downfall, as his attempt to understand the causes of a recent event and his efforts to spread his belief prove to be fatal. In short, the past can be dangerous.

The sense that the past simply cannot be recaptured is presented in a highly allegorical manner in a scene in which Jiang and her friends become prisoners, accused of spying for the Japanese. This is the first extended depiction of their life in China and the tenuous connection with their distant past—the Motherland. In repeated and yet somewhat varied interrogation scenes, an interpreter is required to negotiate between the Taiwanese-speaking intellectuals and the suspicious Cantonese-speaking army officer. Four of the prisoners—Jiang Biyu, Xiao Daoying, Xiao Daoying's wife, and Zhong Haodong—are repeatedly asked about their reasons for coming to China. Although humor is inserted in the interrogation,⁴ it is evident that emotional ties between the Taiwanese and the mainland are hopelessly broken by misunderstandings and distrust, which are exacerbated by the language barrier.

Seemingly to push this issue to its extreme, Liang Jing narrates the

circumstances surrounding Zhong's publication of *Enlightenment* and how a reader inadvertently exposed his own identity and was arrested by the Nationalist government, a scene that is described over a black-and-white shot of Jiang Biyu's burning books at home. It is a brief shot with no dialogue; the audience must rely on Liang's voice-over narration to make the connection between the underground publication and the reason for the book burning. A question concerning this cinematographic strategy immediately arises: Why use Liang Jing instead of a dialogue or intertext? I suspect that Liang's voice-over adds yet another layer of uncertainty to the "facts." Narrating the reason for Zhong's arrest does not necessarily entrust Liang with authority or any claim to truth, although the audience is asked to believe that she knows the facts and is able to supply us with an explanation.

Avrom Fleishman's analysis of an external speaker of a voice-over best exemplifies Liang Jing's role:

For an external narrator, to speak in voice-over is to declare authority as an ultimate source of the story and yet . . . to refrain from personal responsibility for the statements made. This is much in the manner of the novelistic "omniscient narrator," a purportedly neutral deliverer of the facts themselves that, upon inspection, turns out to be a coded system for inducing this impression.⁵

By external voice-over, Fleishman means that the narrator is not a character in the event that he iterates, which, when applied to *Good Men, Good Women*, is complicated, since Liang Jing is a character in the movie but not in the film within a film she is making. Her authority is undercut as it is being established, further creating the impression of Liang Jing as an untrustworthy narrator.

Liang Jing's dubious credibility is introduced in several scenes early in the movie, in which we see her and others in costume, posing for a still photographer. These shots are preparation for the filming of the film within a film and are followed by another scene in black and white, an actual scene from the film within a film. These scenes simultaneously serve two functions: they underscore the fragmentary nature of the story being told in the movie and, at the same time, remind the audience of the artificiality of filmmaking. Moreover, a brief, dialogueless, lovemaking scene in the past between Liang Jing

and her boyfriend appears just before these introductory shots of moviemaking. The contrast is so striking that spectators must alter their viewing habits and their subjective relation to the film, what the Russian Formalists termed the *technique of defamiliarization*: “Film audiences for whom ‘seeing is believing’ tend to forget that cinematic visualizations of history are not transparent windows on the past or mirror reflections but are, like verbal narratives, constructed re-presentations.”⁶ This defamiliarization appears in *The Puppet Master*, in which Li Tianlu, on whose life the film is based, speaks directly into the camera in a movie about him played by an actor. But whereas *The Puppet Master* seems to imply the blurring of “acting, dreams, and life” (hence the Chinese title, *Ximeng rensheng*), *Good Men, Good Women* privileges the acting part.

Unlike Lan Bozhou’s story, which gives detailed descriptions of Zhong and Jiang’s life and living conditions, as well as the guilt Jiang feels after giving away her son, Hou’s film within a film deals with this time period (spanning five years) with just a few scenes. Even the Japanese, whose military presence in China is the cause of the couple’s patriotic efforts, are given minimal space, specifically a scene in which they sneak into the Chinese village where Jiang is staying, to steal food. It is obvious that Hou is not interested in making an antiwar movie. Still, the fact that the principal villain of modern Chinese history is pushed to the periphery is noteworthy, that rather than being shown brutalizing the Chinese or pillaging their homes, the Japanese merely steal a little food from the Chinese villagers. Although some viewers may fault Hou Hsiao-hsien for not painting a more negative picture of the Japanese, for not directly depicting the savagery so well documented in history books and so often seen in anti-Japanese films, Hou renders them inconsequential and forces the viewers to focus on the individual: Jiang Biyu. More important to our purpose is Hou’s interest in the people’s history and the use of a single, brief shot of the theft to encompass all of Jiang’s life on the mainland.

What to Do with the Past

If Hou’s *Good Men, Good Women* is intended to contrast the idealism and sacrifice of a group of Taiwanese intellectuals with the decadent and

meaningless life of modern-day Taiwan youth, as some critics contend, the character of Liang obviously serves to exemplify the contrast. Yet, if we consider how Liang Jing deals with her own recent past and the distant past, Jiang's life, the focus of this contrast becomes blurred. First, there is a palpable disconnect from the past and an apparent unwillingness to recall her own past. The movie opens with a shot of Liang Jing's apartment. The phone rings, waking up Liang, who is, as usual, sleeping amid a pile of blankets and pillows. She gets up and walks slowly over to her fax machine, from which a page of her diary is hanging, waiting for her. From her voice-over, we learn that the diary entry records a recent lovemaking scene with "L" on the third anniversary of the death of Liang's boyfriend, Ah Wei. After reading the fax, she goes into her bathroom; the camera remains outside, and we hear her singing about lost love. Nothing in this shot tells us about how she feels; there is no emotion in her voice. This shot shows us a young woman who seems to be unaffected by her past, an impression reinforced by the subsequent shot, which shows her making love with Ah Wei. The two scenes do not appear to be connected, and Liang Jing seems intent on living a life devoid of any memory of her past. The distant past of Jiang Biyu, the character she plays in the movie, appears to mean even less to her. We thus are left to wonder whether she is really apathetic to her past or if the past is so hard for her to face that she pretends not to care.

The same scenario is repeated in the next shot of the present-day Liang Jing. The phone is ringing again, and this time she answers but there is no response, except for the fax machine that continues to spit out a longer section of her diary. Prasenjit Duara's comparison of history with a telephone call is fascinatingly applicable here: "History comes to us like a telephone call to which we are obliged to respond, presumably, within its initiating framework. Thus we in the present together with our caller from the past, are coproducers of the past."⁷ If we substitute "history" with "the past," then we see Liang Jing's past coming back to her in the form of a telephone call. But there is no response when she answers. The initiating framework is unknown to her, and lacking the coproducer, she is unable to produce the past. She thus must rely on the faxed page from her diary, but the diary itself comes to her in fragments.

Symbolically, this is a particularly important scene, for it sets the tone and defines the theme of the movie: the ambiguous way in which the

Taiwanese approach their past. During the martial law era, the government suppression denied the past, especially the 2/28 Incident, to the people. It was an imposed collective amnesia. When the people were finally allowed to look back and examine the past after martial law was lifted, they were confronted with the lack of an initiating framework, as is Liang Jing in the movie, when the caller from the past refuses to communicate with her: “How we respond to the call and how differently we may respond from each other reflects both our present circumstances and our creativity.”⁸ The circumstances reflected in Liang Jing’s life and in the Taiwanese people’s present is the inability to produce a meaningful response. They are left bewildered, which exemplifies the effect of the White Terror.

Following this allegorical reading, we see the faxed pages of her diary as a form of written history, the most common means through which we know about the past. This metaphor is reinforced by the thermal fax paper that transmits uncut documents. As the machine spews them out continuously, we are presented with the illusion of continuity: one entry follows another, creating a false sense of linkage between entries.⁹ But the diary entry is incomplete on two accounts. First, the faxed pages are only a portion of a book-length diary, and second, even if the diary were whole, it could present only an incomplete record of what has happened, because the recorder of the diary cannot cover any one day’s events comprehensively. Likewise, for the people in Taiwan over the past forty years (from 1947 to 1987), history as they know it is highly subjective and full of omissions. We can draw an analogy between the stolen diary and modern Taiwanese history, particularly pertaining to the 2/28 Incident. That is, by forbidding the Taiwanese to talk and write about this part of their past, the Guomindang government stole their history from them and, like Liang Jing’s experience of retrieving it through the fax machine, fed it back to the people in bits and pieces.¹⁰ Moreover, the process of reassembling historical information is fraught with manipulation, and what is offered often reads like fiction, which is implied in Liang’s monologue about the film they are shooting and why she feels she is turning into Jiang. “These, of course, are impossible thoughts thrust credibly into the audience’s head; that the black-and-white film it [the audience] has already been watching hasn’t been shot yet, and that real people are turning into fictional characters while fictional characters are turning into real ones.”¹¹

The faxed diary alerts us to the dual theme of *Good Men, Good Women*: the impossibility of gaining full knowledge of the past and an unwillingness to confront that past. To achieve the latter, Hou's movie uses several narrative techniques to arrange the layered stories. The most obvious is Liang Jing's interaction (or, more accurately, lack of interaction) with the role she is playing and, by extension, with Jiang Biyu's past. We recall that Liang is first seen dressed in costume for a photo session, a shot without dialogue. In the early part of the filming, we often hear her refer to the movie in a dispassionate voice. For instance, in shot 17,¹² Liang's voice-over is juxtaposed with the visual image of a command center in Huidan, Guangdong: "It's been close to a month since we started the rehearsal, but I have no idea when we'll begin shooting the movie. I feel I'm becoming Jiang Biyu." Her own words notwithstanding, Liang is never seen to be visibly affected by the role she is playing. Some critics might argue that the following scene, the interrogation by the Japanese, implies a kind of identification. That is, by jumping from the present-time Liang Jing to the historical Jiang Biyu, a connection between actor and role, present and past, is formed. I interpret the cut differently, as the comment on rehearsal is only one segment of Liang's voice-over, which also includes a dream she had the night before about Ah Wei and her puzzlement over her sister's negative attitude toward her. The inclusion of this personal information about the actor's life not only minimizes the likelihood of Liang's identifying with Jiang but also underscores Liang's dubious connection with the past: the quasi-national past represented by Jiang, her own past with Ah Wei, and her problems with her sister.

Later shots reinforce Liang's uncertain connection with the multiple past. In shot 23, in which the imprisoned Jiang and others are being transported to another location, Liang Jing's voice-over describes how the five of them were rescued. Her depiction sounds like the recitation of a script, with no emotional involvement in the events in the film within a film. Included in this voice-over is yet another brief reference to Jiang Biyu: "That day, when I went to the hospital to see Jiang Biyu, she said I look like her when she was young, and that she too was very pretty." We are not privy to Liang's inner world and do not know how she reacts to Jiang's comparison, but the similarity between the two appears to be limited to the physical.¹³ The voice-over is carried into the next shot, in which Liang is looking at her fish bowl and wondering

about her stolen diary: “I came home after filming today to find another faxed diary entry. I really don’t know why the thief stole my diary. The person calls but doesn’t say anything. It feels strange to read my own diary every day.”

The juxtaposition of Jiang Biyu’s past and present and Liang’s past and present paints an intriguing picture. In a way, past and present are disjointed, with the past existing only on the periphery of their present life. It is, coincidentally, an echo of Liang’s comment about reading her diary—“strange”—an effect that is intensified by the use of voice-over, “a resource that can be used for the cinematic equivalents of two very different options in novelistic narration, third-person ‘omniscience’ and first-person retrospection—the apparently impersonal historian’s view and the subjective confessions of personal experience.”¹⁴ As a voice-over narrator of Jiang’s and her own life, Liang Jing plays both roles, and hence her narration hovers between the view of the historian and the confession of personal experience, which conveys a sense of disconnect that embodies the suppression of historical memories.

Signs of a similar disconnect can be found in two other segments about Jiang’s life that Liang Jing narrates. In shot 41, in which the Japanese are shown running away after stealing the villagers’ food, the camera pans up to show the canopy of a tree while Liang states:

Nineteen forty-five, the war with Japan was over. Zhong Haodong and Jiang Biyu ended their five years of guerrilla life on the mainland and returned to Taiwan. Zhong Haodong took up a position as principal at Keelung High School, while Jiang Biyu worked at the Taipei Radio Station. They had put their first-born son up for adoption in China because of the war; their second son died of a high fever the year they returned to Taiwan.¹⁵

In Lan Bozhou’s story, Jiang relates the incident and the guilt she felt about not taking good care of the child. In Hou’s movie, not only do we not see the scene acted out, but we also do not hear about it through Jiang’s voice. Instead, it is through the faceless voice of Liang Jing, the woman playing Jiang, that the death is made known to the audience.

This scene also exposes how the story and the film deal differently with time and events. Lan’s story relates events in detail, punctuated by references to the time line. For instance, we are told that Zhong

Haodong and Jiang Biyu returned to Taiwan in April 1946 (in the movie, we learn only that they returned to Taiwan shortly after the end of the war) and that their child died in August 1946. Lan's story is rife with clashes between the public (national, historical incidents) and the personal (private, familial events). It is a text that is afraid of losing its significance if it is not contextualized in the historical. In contrast, Hou's movie strives to focus on the personal, thereby glossing over the public occurrences. In the much discussed opening shot of *A City of Sadness*, the dismembered voice of the emperor of Japan is heard on the radio announcing Japan's surrender, while the Taiwanese are busying themselves with personal activities surrounding the birth of a child in an adjoining room. Hou similarly tries to relegate public history to the margin of personal life in *Good Men, Good Women*.

Furthermore, when public events are introduced with definitive dates in *Good Men, Good Women*, they are meant to cast more doubt on the validity of than to add clarification to the circumstances. An example is another scene narrated by Liang Jing that takes place before Jiang Biyu is arrested. Shot 43 shows Jiang Biyu burning books:

In the fall of 1948, after school began at Keelung High School, Zhong Haodong and his friends started publishing *Enlightenment*. . . . In May 1949, the [Guomindang] retreated to Taiwan. In August, a graduate of the Business School at Taiwan University sent a copy of the underground publication to his girlfriend, thus revealing his identity and causing his arrest.

Again Liang Jing's voice is dispassionate and matter-of-fact. Most interesting, however, is how she plays the dual role of reader of and commentator on history. On the one hand, her emotionless voice gives the impression that she is merely reciting events in Zhong and Jiang's life. On the other hand, her recitation of the enactment of events gives the appearance that she is making a connection between cause (the underground newspaper) and effect (the arrest). Liang serves as a bridge between actions and consequences. But is this really how truth is revealed? As Walter Benjamin reminds us: "Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously."¹⁶ In *Good Men, Good Women*, the

causal linkage is intentionally broken and blurred because it is not Hou's intention to point out the way to search for truth or even imply that truth can be discovered at all. The shot following Jiang's arrest depicts an argument between Liang Jing and her sister, who accuses Liang of seducing her husband.¹⁷ An argument leading to a physical confrontation further suggests the theme of unknowable facts: Liang Jing denies any involvement with her "brother-in-law," whereas her sister cites what other people are saying to prove her case.

These two shots of Jiang's past and present seem unrelated; at most we can say that Liang's argument with her sister serves again to contrast the triviality of her life with Jiang's. But does Jiang Biyu's life really have no bearing on Liang Jing's life, and does one's past, whether personal or national, indeed leave no marks on one's present? To answer these questions, we must examine the ending of the movie. In shot 51, Liang is again harassed by the anonymous, silent caller when her fax machine spews out yet another long roll of her diary. Dragging the faxed paper with her, Liang Jing begins talking to the person on the other end. She asks the caller why he or she took her diary and, at one point, actually begins to call the caller Ah Wei, begging him to come back. This scene is followed by four shots dealing with Zhong Haodong's death. In shot 56, the second-to-last shot of the movie, Jiang Biyu is seen burning spirit money as she reads a letter from Zhong Haodong. When she finishes, she looks up and wails. If Liang's one-sided telephone conversation with the thief indicates a blurring of past and present, then the arrangement of the shots of Liang and Jiang also implies a connection between the two, however tenuous that connection might be. Jiang's life is implicated in Liang's life;¹⁸ since we all are shaped by our pasts, whether personal or national, the final installment of Hou's Taiwan trilogy can be regarded as a comment on the complex, contentious past that cannot be easily understood or interpreted but is nevertheless intricately connected with the present.

HEARTBREAK ISLAND

Heartbreak Island is the second film by Hsu Hsiao-ming, following *Dust of Angels* (*Shaonianye, an la!* 1992), a realist dissection of 1990s youths living on the margins of Taiwan's prosperity. With its vivid depiction

of violence and drug use, *Dust of Angels* was derived from the director's concern about a generation of youth from broken families in a rapidly changing rural society that is ill equipped to deal with the impact of modernization. Hsu is a highly political filmmaker with a clear social conscience who does not shy away from ideological teleology, which is even more noticeable in *Heartbreak Island*. In an interview with the preeminent film critic Peggy Chiao Hsiung-ping, Hsu revealed that after reading the film script adaptation of Dong Nian's "Last Winter," by Guo Zheng, a novelist in his own right, he read the novella himself and was deeply moved. He then worked with Guo Zheng and Dong Nian to revise the script, a process filled with disagreements. Guo Zheng wanted to cast the female protagonist (Chen Linlang) as a quasi-proletarian revolutionary, and Dong Nian, unfettered by Guo's "Marxist critique of a small minority monopolizing the majority of resources," regarded the sources for the novella and film script purely from the perspective of personal experience.¹⁹ Hsu had his own agenda for the cinematic representation of the Formosa Incident of 1979, which is best summed up in his own words: "I tend to feel contemptuous of those who turned their back on their own ideals."²⁰

It is therefore not surprising that Hsu chose the contrast between past and present to explore changes in the lives of some of the activists who fell victim to government brutality in the aftermath of the Formosa Incident. In the film, Chen Linlang finally is released after thirteen years of incarceration. As a college student, Chen had been involved with her teacher Wang Rong, who was active in the opposition movement that culminated in the confrontation in Kaohsiung in the winter of 1979. Following an abortion, she leaves the site of conflict and checks into a hospital. When Wang comes to see her, he is arrested and later put in prison, from which he sends her a letter written in blood. Mistaking his invocation of their relationship as "eternal love," Linlang turns to such extremist tactics as making and throwing bombs as a way to avenge his wrongful *execution*, for which she is arrested and sentenced to thirteen years in prison. After she reenters society, she finds, to her great disappointment and anger, that most of her former comrades have turned into complacent bourgeoisie who are content with their middle-class lifestyle. Worst of all is Wang Rong, now married with a newborn baby boy and running a successful coffee shop and *qigong* classes in the basement of the shop. Disillusionment,

a sense of betrayal, and dislocation eventually drive Linlang to kidnap Wang's son and, true to the ending of Dong Nian's novella, to commit suicide by slitting her wrists.

Just as Hsu Hsiao-ming, by declaring his contempt for those who betrayed their own ideals, made *Heartbreak Island* as a political statement and cinematic manifestation of personal belief, it also is easy for viewers and critics to treat this film as a mere diatribe. A closer examination, however, reveals that it is as much a tirade against Wang Rong and the like as a criticism of the effects of the White Terror. In other words, Wang Rong's change in attitude resulted from the overall atmosphere of suppression and his personal experience of imprisonment. A look back at the past, however, raises more questions than answers in explaining the motivation for Wang's metamorphosis and Linlang's actions, particularly through a liberal use of flashbacks. These flashbacks, all from Linlang's perspective, play a crucial role in dramatizing the contrast and demonstrate that ultimately the film calls for a political interpretation at the expense of the personal, the failed romance between Linlang and Wang Rong.

Flashbacks, writes Maureen Turim, "give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience."²¹ In Linlang's case, her flashbacks are clearly intended to serve as a collective memory of the lost past, in which personal history is intertwined with the political, and it is precisely this mixture that underscores the theme of the film. As Turim further explains,

One of the ideological implications of this narration of history through a subjective focalization is to create history as an essentially individual and emotional experience. Another is to establish a certain view of historical causality and linkage. By presenting the result before the cause, a logic of inevitability is implied; certain types of events are shown to have certain types of results without ever allowing for other outcomes than the one given in advance.²²

The historical causality in this film, represented through Linlang and, to a lesser extent, Wang Rong, fingers an oppressive political cli-

mate as the culprit for the inevitable compromises one has to make. Furthermore, we should not take too literally Hsu Hsiao-ming's self-proclaimed indictment of those who betray their ideals, for the cinematic style ultimately produces an irresolvable contradiction between directorial intent and the film.

Past as Causality

Heartbreak Island has, strictly speaking, two pasts: the political—Wang's involvement in opposition politics—and the personal—Linlang's relationship with Wang Rong. Owing to the nature of the film, the political and personal aspects are intertwined from the very beginning. Since the flashbacks to Wang's political activities and his relationship with Linlang are presented solely from her perspective, the political aspect is unavoidably colored by her recollection, interpretation, and re-creation, which serves as the historical causality and linkage posited by Turim. The director uses this historical causality to explain and dramatize Wang Rong's betrayal, but the highly personalized nature of the flashbacks and their connection with the present problematize Linlang's action, consequently turning the film into an examination of a former political activist/rehabilitated terrorist.

All together there are seven flashbacks, presented in the classical sense of flashbacks in that, except for the first one, they all are triggered by Chen Linlang's present situation and thought processes. But the flashbacks form an organic whole to explain her kidnapping Wang's son and taking her own life. The film opens with shots of a long dark hallway and Linlang looking out through the slot in her prison cell door. Then the opening credits appear on the screen, followed by a Taipei cityscape, in which Wang Rong is engaged in a *qigong* session and his mother returns from shopping with his baby, who is then handed over to his wife, An-an. Then the camera cuts to Linlang in prison, thus beginning the first flashback: the voice-over news report of the riot in Kaohsiung (1979, about a decade earlier) bleeding into a scene at a hospital, where Linlang is lying in bed with a friend at her side when Wang Rong appears in the doorway. The police quickly come in and take him away. It is not until the fourth flashback that we learn the reason she was in the hospital: she had just had an abortion, and the hospital stay was the

result of complications from the procedure. These two introductory segments draw a stark contrast between Wang's normal family life and Linlang's life in prison, as her flashback emphasizes the difference and gives the audience the first hint of her later actions.

Like the disjointed arrangement of events depicted in Dong Nian's original novella, *Heartbreak Island* begins with Linlang's past in an anachronistic manner by flashing back to the reason of her imprisonment—Wang Rong's arrest—but the connection is made clear only later when we learn from her conversation with Wang that she intends to avenge his (presumed) execution. In short, the Linlang of the past was not a political activist with strong beliefs but a young woman who had lost her lover/mentor to the Nationalist government's political oppression. We are reminded of the Grieving Founding Mother in Li Ang's "The Devil in a Chastity Belt," in which the female protagonist loses her husband to the government's surveillance machinery during the same incident. Whereas the Grieving Founding Mother opts for involvement in the political process—running for office—to counter the government's power, Linlang chooses the radical action of making bombs. Both texts evoke the image of a suffering woman turning to political activism not because of her political convictions but because of her love for the man in her life. The main difference is, of course, that Linlang is looking backward to search for a reason to move forward, and since "recollection is about the confrontation with absence and forgetting,"²³ her inability to deal with the changes in her present life drives her to further drastic, even desperate, measures.

As triggers to recalling the past, the seven flashbacks explain more about Linlang's action than about Wang Rong's transformation, or about the (dis)connect between past and present. Flashbacks 2, 3, and 4, three consecutive segments, are sandwiched between similar shots of the newly freed Linlang in her old apartment. After the first flashback of Wang Rong's arrest, we learn three important things about Linlang's past:

Flashback 2. Wang enlightens Linlang about inequalities in the world.

Flashback 3. Wang and Linlang visit Wang's hometown.

Flashback 4. Linlang talks to a doctor about her pregnancy and her desire for an abortion.

Flashback 2 is important in that it conveys the image of an apolitical Linlang, thus underscoring the changes taking place in her life. As the flashback begins, Wang is shown writing late into the night. When the sleeping Linlang wakes up, Wang instructs her on the importance of opposition movements, prompting her to question why he must be the one who fights the injustice. Flashback 3 takes Linlang and the audience back to Wang's hometown, where his Taiwanese gentry family lives. We see Wang's mother presenting a pair of golden bells (a homophone with Linlang's name) to Linlang, and Wang's father, like most Taiwanese parents, discouraging Wang from getting involved in politics.

Taken together, these three flashbacks form an elliptical narrative of Linlang's life before prison. Although they have no apparent logical connection (spatial or temporal) with one another, we must assume a chronological order from her initiation (into opposition politics) to a visit back to Wang's hometown to her decision to stop the pregnancy. Maureen Turim's observation on flashbacks with nostalgic characteristics is illuminating here:

Nostalgia is a figure ambiguously attached to the flashback; the past is an object of desire, due to its personal, intense, and even liberating attributes, but it is also dangerous and frightening. Flashbacks in most cases terminate at precisely the point at which they must be sealed off, in which the imperatives of fixing interpretations and reaching judgments in the present must be imposed.²⁴

We detect a sense of nostalgia at work in Linlang's recollections, and indeed for her, a judgment has been reached and she finds Wang Rong in order to confront him.

The next flashback, the fifth, occurs shortly after Linlang spots Wang and his family leaving in his car, and she faints. In this flashback we see the young Linlang running home to see her mother engaged in sexually charged intimacy with a man who is not Linlang's father, whose absence is never explained. Then the camera cuts to a scene of the adult Linlang calling her mother from a pay phone. We can assume that this particular flashback is triggered by seeing Wang and his family, but the flashback itself also prompts her to phone her mother. The fusion of different facets of past and present elicits a subjective

response that plays a significant role in a chain of actions in Linlang's life after prison, because flashbacks

infuse the present with the weight of the past, allowing an already subjectively rendered site to give way to another that is even more subjective, in that it is constituted as a memory image. If subjectivity is the site of these fictions, memory is the site that offers explanations for the dark subjectivity one experiences in the present. The flashback becomes a means of expressing the mood of remembrance in instances in which memory is bitter, nostalgic, melancholy, obsessive—anything but simply happy.²⁵

In other words, Linlang's past, presented as flashbacks, is used to illuminate the causes of her present actions. Turim's characterization of the memory as bitter and *obsessive* is an apt description of Linlang's state of mind.

Although the obsessive nature of Linlang's memory is an adequate explanation for her act of kidnapping, the flashback contributes little to linking her political beliefs to the kidnapping, especially when we examine the scene in which she confronts Wang Rong about the abandonment of his ideals. When Wang argues that "times have changed, and we must change too," Linlang stresses that she wants to help him finish what they started, to which he responds, "You're crazy." The leap from her wish to continue their former activities to kidnapping his son is too great to be an acceptable explanation, except that her mental state is deteriorating rapidly. The arrangement of these flashbacks makes us wonder whether she is searching in her relationship with Wang for a surrogate family. This impression is intensified when she later kidnaps his son, since her abortion (depicted in flashback 4) has made it impossible for her to have children. Or perhaps she believes that Wang's baby will replace the one she lost in order for her to form an imagined family. Either way, these flashbacks construct logical links and offer information about her personal motivation.

The only direct reference to the Formosa Incident and Wang's involvement in it appears in flashback 6, with highly symbolic significance. It is triggered by Wang's letter written in blood, which Linlang finds at her mother's house after she leaves prison. It is, we recall, this letter that turns her into an avenging bomb-making terrorist. The sight

of the letter takes her and the audience back to the past, where she and Wang are engaged in a conversation; but we hear only a news report about the arrest of two members of the opposition movement on the day before a demonstration in Kaohsiung escalated into a violent confrontation between riot police and protesters. The conversation is followed by a scene in which Linlang visits an abortion clinic, after which Wang puts her on a bus back to Taipei. The flashback ends with her on the bus, watching the city of Kaohsiung become embroiled in unrest as blood begins to flow between her legs. Chronologically what comes next is the scene of her stay in the hospital, presented in flashback 1.

Astute viewers will quickly grasp the connection among the blood Wang uses to write the letter, Linlang's blood from the abortion, and, more subtly, the blood shed on the streets of Kaohsiung. Although the director indicated that he was interested more in exploring the lives of marginal figures involved in the Formosa Incident than in the incident itself or of major figures like Shi Mingde and Yao Jiawen, the reference to blood points to the film's delicate engagement with violence that occurs at the scene, without resorting to a gory depiction. Linlang's pregnancy, brought on because of her attraction to Wang Rong's ideology and terminated on the eve of the Formosa Incident, symbolizes the end of an era. It is, ultimately, a fruitless struggle. Nonetheless, like the letter written in blood, the abortion has lasting repercussions in their lives a decade later. Similarly, the Formosa Incident of 1979, although resulting in the imprisonment of many opposition activists, has always been credited as the single most important event in Taiwan's democratization. That is, the consequences of an event, whether personal, like a terminated pregnancy, or political, like an aborted attempt at obtaining greater civil liberties, can be influential for years afterward.

Flashback 7, depicting Linlang's intention to leave Wang Rong before the incident casts another shadow over her, for it leads to her kidnapping scheme. In the flashback, upon seeing her packing, Wang tells her that she can leave if she is afraid, and she replies tearfully that she is afraid for him, for his safety. By this time in the film, we know everything there is to know about their past and about his metamorphosis from political activist to "normal" bourgeois husband and father. It is safe to argue that by placing this last piece of information about

the past here, the director intends the audience to see the reason why she kidnaps Wang's baby: Linlang has become a woman avenging the wrong done to her by Wang Rong (and perhaps by society), which is exactly the kind of movie Hsu did not want to make.²⁶ Compounding this (mis)representation of Linlang is her suicide, which further renders her as a displaced and dislocated character, a social misfit. It seems, however, inevitable that suicide is the way out for Linlang and perhaps for the film itself. If Linlang represents an unwanted past that post-martial law Taiwan, symbolized by Wang Rong, would rather bury, then what better way to deal with it than to literally kill it off? This is the impression left by the final scene of the film: an ambulance is driving off with Linlang's body while Wang Rong stands there, one arm holding the baby and the other around his wife's shoulder. Order has been restored in Wang's life, which was temporarily disrupted by the haunting past, and Linlang, the ghost, has been exorcised with her suicide. The present is finally rid of the past.

Appearing as the last flashback in the film, this scene deserves further discussion, not only because it reiterates Linlang's reasons for her past and her present acts, but also because it serves the dubious function of conveying the alleged purpose of the film. At the end of the movie, when Wang confronts his former girlfriend-turned-kidnapper, he utters tearful regrets that it was his fault and that he should have let her leave years before. The former political activist's sentiment is understandable, for from his perspective, he is responsible for Linlang's transformation. But his lack of more meaningful reflection on the past is apparent and disturbing to the extent that we wonder whether Linlang, and not Wang, is the intended target of critique for betraying one's ideals. That is, the characterization of Linlang as a kidnapper fails to convey the director's contempt for those who betray their ideals, since she does not appear to have any political ideals and is portrayed as close to deranged.²⁷ Most unsettling is the ending shot, in which Wang, along with his wife, is presented as a bereft parent and the victim of a vengeful former girlfriend. In order not to reduce the film to a melodrama of lost love and revenge, we must treat Linlang symbolically as Wang's past coming back to haunt him.

Wang's distant attitude toward Linlang represents a disconnect with the past, similar to Liang Jing's unwillingness to remember the past in

Good Men, Good Women. Linlang's imprisonment can then be considered as discarding or burying one's painful memory of the past, even though the past remains in one's unconscious. Not unlike Liang Jing's distance from her own past and from Jiang Biyu's life, Wang Rong's desire to forget should not be regarded merely as emblematic of the victory of a bourgeois lifestyle over political dedication but as a result of the pernicious effects of the White Terror, which has changed a former political prisoner into someone who just wants to live a normal life.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, Linlang's suicide is a cinematically and politically expedient strategy to rid the present of the past, albeit in a disquieting manner that reminds us that "women, in being relegated to absence, silence, and marginality, have thereby also to a degree been relegated to the outskirts of historical discourse, if not to a position totally outside of history."²⁹

Present as Consequences

Despite Hsu Hsiao-ming's caustic criticism of people like Wang Rong, *Heartbreak Island* is more than a political diatribe. In fact, by examining the changes in the minor characters' lives over the decade following the Formosa Incident, we discern its impact on them. For instance, the young college girl who was Linlang's best friend is now the mother of two, and she refuses to tell Linlang where Wang Rong is, obviously believing that Linlang should forget about the past. In the scene in which Linlang asks about Wang, we see the girl crying on Linlang's shoulder. Although we are not told the reason for her tears, we can speculate that despite a seemingly comfortable life and two children, she is not happy with her life. Also of interest is that Linlang is the one lending her a literal shoulder to cry on. Another friend, obviously a member of the opposition movement, is now selling cheap clothes in a night market. He justifies this development by claiming that times have changed and he needs to make a living.³⁰

Yet another acquaintance from an earlier time, Jinguang, a political fanatic, wants to run for president and asks Wang to serve as the minister of defense in his administration if he is elected. Jinguang later offers Linlang the same position, reiterating the importance of treating the soldiers with love and care. Although we may laugh at Jinguang's

unrealistic dream and delusional fantasy about being the president, we cannot ignore the altered political climate after martial law was lifted, in which the naive dream of running for president is available to anyone, without fear of dire consequences. Compared with the persecution of activists who demanded more civil liberties during the demonstration that resulted in the largest-scale arrest since the 1950s, Jinguang's freedom to say and do whatever he wants is a change that should not be ignored. Hence, his character invites us to ponder whether the present is indeed worse than the past.

The film's most problematic character is Linlang, whose search for Wang Rong and kidnapping of his son can be seen as an attempt to create an imagined family. After her release from prison, in addition to her disillusionment with the changes in her friends, Linlang returns to her home in a *juancun* (villagelike residential compounds for mainlanders relocated to Taiwan), only to find her mother lying dead in bed, an obvious suicide. This seemingly gratuitous plot twist serves to remind the audience that Linlang has nothing, no friends, no family. To be sure, we can attribute the changes, especially the belated news of her mother's death, to the political oppression of the martial law era, which has created a distance between mother and daughter. But from a neighbor's incessant criticism of Linlang, we learn that her flight from home, like her radical actions after Wang's arrest, was not politically motivated.

The problematic nature of Linlang's character derives from her gender. As we have seen, in the fictional and cinematic rendition of defiance against government oppression in Taiwan, women are almost never depicted as active participants. They are either innocent bystanders, like the protagonist in "A Minor Biography of Huang Su," or guilty by association, like the Grieving Founding Mother and Jiang Biyu. Linlang appears to be the only female character who takes control of her life, but the contrast between past and present makes her actions appear misguided and dubiously motivated. Here we may find it useful to contemplate E. Ann Kaplan's questions about "the relationships between images of women on film and the level of fantasy, desire, unconscious wishes and fears that has both individual and social/historical formations. Whose desire is at work in a particular film? Whose unconscious is being addressed?"³¹ On a practical level, because the film script is the product of people with different

ideologies, it inevitably results in a distracted film. On a discursive level, it is not too far-fetched to argue that *Heartbreak Island* addresses the unconscious of the Taiwanese (men) in the 1990s, while women serve as a foil for a cinematic gaze at the dislocated present and the lost past.

FICTION VERSUS FILM

The differences between literature (mostly fiction) and cinema demand changes and adjustments when a literary work is adapted into a film, whether adapting John Steinbeck's realist, social critique *The Grapes of Wrath* or John Fowles's metafictional *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: "When a novel, short story, or play is made into a movie, a metamorphosis occurs. We often speak simply of 'filming a book,' as though the characters in a work could step off the page and perform before a camera, but this expression fails to convey the complicated process involved."³² When compounded by other factors, such as politics and ideology, the conversion to cinema can further alter a literary text to the point that a film bears only remote similarities to its original source.³³ The two novellas, "Song of the Covered Wagon" and "Last Winter," analyzed in chapter 2 use complex narrative strategies that only further complicate the adaptation process. Lan Bozhou's utilization of eyewitness testimony, though technically easy to accomplish on screen, makes a poor cinematic version of the original. Similarly, the *mise-en-scène* of Dong Nian's intricate chronology of events poses an insurmountable challenge to any director foolish enough to take on the task. Furthermore, different authorial and directorial intents accentuate the alterations that are inevitable in this process, as demonstrated by the following comparative analysis.

Lan Bozhou's "Song of the Covered Wagon" tries to restore history by focusing on an individual, but his employment of eyewitness accounts nevertheless underscores the reality that no account can claim to be complete. The narrative strategy of beginning Zhong Haodong's story with the moment just before his execution also entails an artificiality that makes the reader keenly aware of its constructedness, despite the linear, progressive history—from his childhood to his

unjust death—that follows. Moreover, by inserting itemized historical events, the narrative also creates the perception that public events are somehow more important than an individual's life, which, in turn, privileges the very government-oriented historical writings that Lan sets out to refute.

Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*, in contrast, narrates two women's lives in a disjointed manner while questioning our knowledge of the past. In an oblique way, it also examines the Taiwanese people's approach to their past. Liang Jing, living a life seemingly detached from her own past, as well as Jiang Biyu's past, is emblematic of such an attitude. But the structure of the movie also underscores people's tenuous connection with their past. Robert A. Rosenstone's comment on experimental films best characterizes Hou's approach to the past in *Good Men, Good Women*: "History as experiment does not make the same claim on us as does the realist film. Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past. The aim is not to tell everything, but to point to past events, or to converse about history, or to show why history should be meaningful to people in the present."³⁴

It is clear that Lan Bozhou and Hou Hsiao-hsien have approached the representation of the White Terror very differently. As someone who has been continually interviewing and unearthing eyewitnesses and survivors, Lan is keen on rediscovering the past.³⁵ In his effort to comprehend and recover that past, he cannot avoid the logic of causality. For instance, Zhong Haodong's eventual execution is seen as a result of his involvement in leftist activities, which is directly linked to the Guomintang's anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s. Hou Hsiao-hsien, in contrast, explores the fragile link between past and present to simultaneously re-create and question the representation of the past, in a detached and yet quotidian manner.³⁶ The differences between Lan and Hou can easily be ascertained by their narrative styles and, to a lesser extent, the focus of their stories. The first-person narrators—Jiang Biyu, Zhong Shunhe, and Zhong Liyi—in "Song of the Covered Wagon" speak directly from their own experience, thus creating a sense of authenticity and credibility. *Good Men, Good Women*, however, is told exclusively from Liang Jing's perspective, giv-

ing the impression that the film is, after all, one woman's story. In addition, we cannot help but notice that Zhong Haodong, the center of Lan's story, does not occupy a significant space in the film. Liang Jing and Jiang Biyu (particularly because she is played by Liang Jing) are the focus of Hou's movie, a subtle reference to women and history best expounded by Chu T'ien-wen: "After men all died for their struggles, women came out to comfort the battlefield and bear witness to historical facts."³⁷

Similarly, owing to the differences in media, Hsu Hsiao-ming deviates from Dong Nian's version in dramatizing the story of Chen Linlang and Wang Rong regarding the Formosa Incident. Dong Nian's "Last Winter" was written within days of the Formosa Incident, at a time when creative freedom was limited and writers needed to practice self-censorship. He was restricted in commenting on the incident, thus resorting to elliptical references to news reports. When Hsu Hsiao-ming made *Heartbreak Island* in 1995, the changes in the political climate gave him not only more freedom but also a perspective, both unavailable to Dong Nian. Hence the Formosa Incident becomes the past in Linlang and Wang Rong's lives, and their present is contemporaneous with that of the film audience. This temporal shift is a highly political and politicized choice by the director, for Hsu is not as interested in representing the Formosa Incident as in condemning those who abandon their ideals.

Dong Nian's novella moves back and forth between the past—Wang Rong and Linlang's romance—and the present—the Formosa Incident of 1979. By using dates to punctuate the temporal shifts in order to avoid giving the impression of a flashback from the perspective of a certain character and through the incorporation of news reports, the novella creates an impression that collective memories can be manufactured. After the archival documents were made available to the public and eyewitness accounts were collected and published, it became clear that contemporary reports from the news media (print and electronic) about the Formosa Incident were biased against members of the opposition movement, painting a picture of terrorist mobsters with the intention of overthrowing the government. The film version, using flashback, becomes the story of one woman's life from naive, apolitical college student to bomb-making

terrorist-cum-kidnapper. The juxtaposition of past and present via flashbacks creates the impression that all of Linlang's actions hinge on her desire to recapture the past, although it is unclear which past she tries to recover: the political past, when everyone seemed to be imbued with lofty ideals (Wang being the epitome), or the personal past, when she and Wang were lovers. There is a displacement of the political with the personal in *Heartbreak Island*, whereas in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*, the personal is clearly meant to dominate the political.

Noteworthy also is Wang Rong's wife, An'an, who plays virtually no role in Hsu's film. Except for frantically searching for the baby after the kidnapping, she is largely invisible. In the fictional version, however, she is prominently featured. As a member of a younger generation, An'an is ignorant of Wang Rong's past involvement in radical activities and is uninterested in politics. Throughout the novella, she is petulant and constantly engaged in willful behavior. In particular, bewildered by Wang's silence and detachment, she asks him whether he is "hiding something from her." The literary portrayal of An'an not only sets up a contrast with the older generation—Wang and Chen—but also hints at Taiwan's younger generation's lack of historical memory. By diminishing An'an's significance in the film, Hsu has effectively and drastically changed Dong Nian's text and eliminated the importance of generational memory in the transmission of knowledge about Taiwan's tortured past. Consequently, multilayered pasts versus present in "Last Winter" are replaced by a streamlined contrast between the past and the present of two main characters in *Heartbreak Island*.

Dong Nian's novella concludes with Wang Rong's visit to Linlang's tomb, where he waters the chrysanthemums while thinking, "All the entangled gratitude, grudges, happiness, and suffering were *truly* in the past."³⁸ A sense of closure, embedded in the emphasized notion of letting bygones be bygones, colors the overall tone of the novella.³⁹ The ending is clearly a humanistic gesture aimed at the need for reconciliation and tolerance, but the inherent danger of such an ending is the slippery slope of forgetfulness to obliteration of memory. Hsu Hsiao-ming, likely concerned about this tendency to forgive and forget, halts the cinematic narrative at the moment of Linlang's suicide. When Wang Rong, with his nuclear family intact, watches the medical

personnel cart Linlang's bloody body into an ambulance, the audience is left to ponder his state of mind and the entangled issues of Taiwan's past and present. As evidenced in the cinematic and literary texts studied in this chapter, the contrast not only serves as an effective narrative strategy but also carries prominent ramifications for the future, for the recalling of the past is always about the future.