

In the Realm of the Indigenous:

Local, National, and Global Articulations in *Fishing Luck*

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When I first saw *Fishing Luck* (*Deng dai fei yu*), in 2005, it was the opening film for the Twelfth Women Make Waves festival in Taipei, and the theater was packed and buzzing with good energy and conversation. Although my attendance was partly due to the fact that my documentary was part of the festival, I arrived that evening with much anticipation to see the film because I had just returned from a four-day visit to Orchid Island.

I had gone with a group of Taiwanese artists to visit the island, and we were warmly welcomed by a group of local men; I was welcomed as a “sister who has traveled far” to come back to her ancestral homeland. In our conversations, we talked about filmmaking. Many of the men there were not new to media production; they worked on productions as assistants, translators, camera operators, and some had been featured. In the past twenty years, with the changing political landscape in Taiwan and growing advo-

cacy for Aborigine pride, there has been an emergence of Aborigine-subject media alongside growing sympathy for Aborigines and interest in Aborigine culture.

Tseng Wen-Chen, director of *Fishing Luck*, was introduced as a veteran filmmaker of the festival. Her films, mostly documentaries, had been showcased at the festival over the years and garnered many awards. *Fishing Luck* was her first feature-length narrative, and one of very few in Taiwan directed by a woman. Tseng introduced her film by first remarking that on her way to the theater, she noticed how the Hsimending entertainment district was inundated with Hollywood films. She expressed hope that more people would see her film in order to support Taiwanese filmmaking. Otherwise, she said, these films would become rarer to see, and then who would tell our stories? On that note, the audience understood that she, as a media maker, was deeply aware of the importance of film (i.e., feature narratives), perhaps including her own, in contributing to a national identity and memory.

Fishing Luck is described as a romance story set on breathtaking Orchid Island between a young woman from Taipei and a young Aborigine man from Orchid Island. The film opens with a secondhand American Buick with three bullet holes being lowered by a crane as it descends upon the small island's port. We later see that with a little Third World ingenuity, the vehicle has been transformed into the colorful Flying Fish One touring vehicle and takes part in the island's lean cash economy. We are immediately introduced to the male lead, Behong, played by Biung—a popular Bunun Aborigine folk singer and television drama actor—and his two friends, Jeddah and Qingkuang, self-designated as “the best young men on Orchid Island.”

The female lead, Zing, played by Linda Liao, a popular MTV video jockey, is later introduced stepping off the propeller plane onto Orchid Island for her job assignment of surveying cell phone signals on the island. Zing is immediately greeted by Behong, who makes an offer to rent her his Flying Fish One. Through several plot twists and turns, the two main leads find themselves unexpectedly spending quite a bit of time together.

Locally Made

Fishing Luck is the first narrative film involving and featuring Orchid Island, home to approximately 2,700 Tao Aborigines. Behong's car rental service turns him into a native guide by default. He introduces Orchid Island to Zing and to us, the audience — “One road connects four tribes, so we often run into each other. Isn't it beautiful?” — and at times this type of dialogue makes the film seem like a television travel show. However, I credit the writers with trying to maintain a delicate balance between being educational and catering to popular taste through its actors, peppy music, and love story narrative. After all, they are dealing with a national audience that is by and large conditioned by the aesthetics and new technologies applied to commercial and dominant, mostly American films.

Shortly after the film's premiere, I had the fortune to interview Tseng alongside Cho Li, its production manager and translator.¹ Tseng was born and raised in Taipei and received her film education in Taiwan. In 1995 she worked for Dimensions Communications, where she directed documentaries on Aborigine topics. She told me that while she was working there the directors were non-Aborigine, although some production crew members were Aborigine. For her work, she had traveled to Orchid Island several times as a TV series director and had always thought that film could capture the beauty of the island's scenery.

Years later, Tseng finally wrote the script for *Fishing Luck*. In a previous interview, Tseng stated that the story “takes the time to present life on [Orchid Island] to audiences throughout Taiwan, who might otherwise not be aware of the idyllic beauty of the place and the uncomplicated lives of the people who live there.”² Funding for the film came from the Government Information Office and Lumiere Motion Pictures, a partner of Sanlih E-television, Taiwan's largest television corporation. The total cost of production, including distribution was \$15 million NT, not quite \$500,000 USD — a sizable budget by Taiwanese standards.³ *Fishing Luck* is distributed by both Ocean Deep Films and Lumiere Motion Pictures. Since its theatrical premiere, *Fishing Luck* has shown on cable television in Taiwan and as part of Taiwan public television's 2008 showcase of “classic national cinema,” clearly marking its status as part of a national cinema.

Overall, *Fishing Luck* avoids blatantly exoticizing people through the love story narrative. Most of what is exotic and mystical gets transferred onto the flying fish, a food staple of Orchid Island and advertised as a symbol of “bliss and abundance.”⁴ Zing herself has never seen flying fish, which she imagines vividly and which represent a recurring theme in the film. Still, whether genuine and well-meaning, a manifestation of Taiwanese culturalism, or a symbol of repressed desires, such desires for and projection of what is indigenous are complex and have varied outcomes. I would argue that the cinematic projection of the indigenous, especially by nonindigenous producers, is problematic and is often wrought with exoticism and primitivism. This problematic tendency is exacerbated by the inherent properties of the filmic medium, the technology of photography and projection, and the mode of exhibition. Unfortunately, *Fishing Luck* is not exempt from such problems, despite its nonexoticizing narrative.

Indigenously Accented

No doubt there has been growing international interest for films about indigenous stories and tales set on indigenous territory. Big box office hits have included the nonindigenous-produced and -directed *Whale Rider* (New Zealand, 2002) and *Dances with Wolves* (USA, 1990). The past twenty years have also seen the appearance of feature-length films made by indigenous directors from countries such as the United States, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and recently Fiji; the better-known titles include *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), *Once Were Warriors* (1995), and *Smoke Signals* (1998).⁵ Some of these films, like *Whale Rider*, aimed for an international movie-going audience. Those that did well in the international box office were usually big budget productions involving epic narratives, cinematic spectacles of “pristine” nature, and modern iconographic notions of the “noble savage.”

To varying degrees, most indigenous-subject feature narratives, especially those that are nonindigenously produced, embody some essence of the “primitive” and actually rely on this for their marketability. Here, I use the terms *primitive* and *primitivism* as succinctly defined by scholar Marianna Torgovnick: “Primitivism inhabits thinking about origins and pure states; it informs desires for known beginnings and by extension, for *predictable*

ends [my emphasis]. Primitivism is the utopian desire to go back and recover irreducible features of the psyche, body, land and community — to reinhabit core experiences.”⁶ Primitivism in cinema, then, invariably entails construction of spaces and narratives where yearnings, desires, and fantasies are all played out in the celluloid zoo.

What constitutes the primitive for a place like Taiwan, whose origins are debated on a daily basis in order to justify “predictable ends” — that being, should Taiwan reunify with China, or should Taiwan be a sovereign nation? In the last twenty years, the growing awareness of and interest in Aborigine life and culture have sought to differentiate Taiwan from China as a way of counteracting China’s sinocizing efforts. However, that interest in Taiwan’s Aborigines has tended to veer toward primitivism, at times, to the point of fantasy and fetish.

The opening Web page for *Fishing Luck* reads in English: “A city girl from Taipei, an Aboriginal man from Orchid Island, the two encounter on beautiful Orchid Island, the most romantic Mandarin film of the year.”⁷ She is identified only by place, he by place *and* by his ethnicity as Aborigine. The English-language material continues, “They [Tao] seem to *naturally* [my emphasis] carry the spirit of being contented, persistent and sincere.”⁸ As such, “Orchid Island’s decorated boats, *innocence* [my emphasis] of the islanders, and the romantic encounter of the two leads, leave this film unforgettable.”⁹ The notion that indigenous peoples are somehow naturally endowed with traits of innocence, contentment, and sincerity only serves to illuminate the narrow path of primitivism.

While the director claims that *Fishing Luck* was made for local Taiwanese audiences, the company has submitted it to the international film festival circuit. Representing Chinese-Taipei, *Fishing Luck* screened at Pusan International Film Festival’s Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) special program as one of their initiatives “to reduce the psychological barriers to trade by enhancing intercultural understanding.”¹⁰

Fishing Luck does attempt to give us a glimpse into the Tao way of life through Behong’s family. In scenes with Behong’s family, played by nonactors, the production logistics are not unlike visual ethnographic productions. For example, the crew relied on an informant — a young Tao man named Zhang Ye-Hai who assisted with translation, negotiated between the crew

and locals, taught Biung how to dive, and assisted the cinematographer with underwater photography. However, the crew did face challenges in capturing “authentic” scenes. For example, for the scene in which Zing is invited to eat dinner with Behong’s family, Tseng was determined to film in a traditional Tao house. She explained that the village she wanted to film was conservative and did not like outsiders. With Zhang’s assistance, they paid a family for the use of their home, but they actually ended up paying twice the amount that was previously agreed upon. Tseng and Cho then recounted a story they heard about a Taiwanese film crew from the television drama series *Life Story* (*Ren sheng ju zhan*): in 2003 this crew’s car was attacked with stones by young people on Orchid Island, indicating that tensions between Aborigines and non-Aborigine Taiwanese remain strong.

As a work of social commentary, the film is nearly devoid of politics.¹¹ There is no historical backdrop given to this idyllic paradise called Orchid Island or to its relationship with Taiwan proper. Issues of class and social status are minor if emphasized at all. Tseng explained in our interview that she is fully aware of the various problems faced by Orchid Island and its inhabitants related to economics, medical care, environmental destruction, fading traditions, and nuclear waste dump issues. But for her first feature narrative, she wanted to make a story that was “safe” and easy to understand and did not carry such a big burden.

It is a bold act to set a film involving Aborigine people and their land in contemporary times without handling any social problems. The main character, Zing, also seems incredibly clueless about Orchid Island; she seems to have no preconceived notions about the island. Throughout the film, one wonders what exactly Zing is transfixed by: Behong? The landscape? Flying fish? A state of “transcendental homelessness”?¹²

Nationally Oriented

As a Taiwanese national cinema (*guo pian*), *Fishing Luck* certainly spans the linguistic, ethnic, and spatial diversity of Taiwan, though it still occupies a Han viewing position, not unlike the popular minority films from China. However, when *Fishing Luck* represented Chinese-Taipei at Pusan film festival’s APEC screening, what did it suddenly become? Chinese cinema?

Local Chinese cinema? Or a Chinese minority film? Or, as the English-language press material for *Fishing Luck* states, a Mandarin film?¹³

What then is the *character* of a Taiwanese national cinema — especially for a place that is a relatively small island in physical mass? When people in films are recognizable (for example, I've met some of the nonactors in *Fishing Luck*), one characteristic is a deep sense of a people carrying out their lives in the same territory, creating a similar sense of play that comes from watching home movies. Therefore, not only as a multiple mirroring of self, national cinema serves as a form of social memory, so critical amid the hegemonic film production, aesthetic codes, and distribution coming from transnational media giants based in the First World.

To characterize Taiwan, and hence its cinema, as Third World is to recognize the status of Taiwan within the “imperialized formations” of economics and politics.¹⁴ According to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's categorization of Third World cinema, *Fishing Luck* would at least fall into the largest category: “Cinematic productions by Third World peoples regardless of whether they adhere to the principles of ‘Third Cinema’ and regardless of the period of production.”¹⁵ Here *Third Cinema*, a term originally declared in the infamous 1969 manifesto “Toward a Third Cinema” by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, refers to “films of decolonization that turn their backs on or actively oppose the System.”¹⁶

It is rare in contemporary Taiwanese cinema (including *Fishing Luck*) to find the sort of cinema of urgency that typifies, for example, Latin American Third Cinema production. Documentary production, a popular genre in Taiwan since the post-martial law era, tends to fulfill this role. However, Taiwan's feature narrative production is in a tough position to be made and even to be seen. In 2006, domestic feature films represented only 7.8 percent of the films screened that year.¹⁷ Funding is slim. The Government Information Office is the main governmental funding source for motion picture production in Taiwan, and although Tseng feels the office is supportive, its regulations change every year, making it difficult for filmmakers to anticipate and prepare for the next application cycle. She further stated that the funds are very competitive. As for distribution, beyond the film festival circuit, there is very little support in place, for example, that requires Taiwan's theaters to reserve screens for domestically produced works.

Nonetheless, in the spirit not only of entertainment and consumerism, but of cultural awareness, Tseng and her producer employed a storytelling technique in an attempt to create openness and acceptance — that is, the use of humanism as a strategy to engender empathy. In a country where every piece of media is overtly politicized, there is a temptation to swing the other direction — to take the politics out altogether.

What remains, then? Another Hollywood-like film that at best succeeds in bearing witness to the decay of bourgeois values in Taiwan? In the context of Taiwan, I would suggest that a film such as *Fishing Luck* presents a utopian vision that speaks to social and interpersonal relations. The logistics of cinematic production require a strategy and technique unique to Taiwan's political, social, and media landscape, and as a result they help to shape and define a Taiwanese aesthetic, hence a national cinema. Without politics — sexual or otherwise — and without borders or prejudice, the ocean in *Fishing Luck* becomes the liminal space where the two leads meet. *Fishing Luck*, along with the films of Tsai Ming-Liang, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and Ang Lee, reach into the depths of human relations. It also expresses a certain modern “Where are we headed?” angst that is very much tied to environmentalism.

The film thus becomes more an exploration or questioning about the possibility of such a union between two people from different backgrounds — both also having to make choices against the forces of the metropolis. As the film progresses, Behong invariably becomes a more stable other against which Zing defines herself, signifying perhaps that Orchid Island (i.e., Aborigine lands and Aborigines themselves) remain a stable entity against which the rest of Taiwan can define itself — though this is of course a problematic notion. In the end, *Fishing Luck*'s narrative typifies the age-old paradigm of the lost modern saved by the primitive, as Orchid Island eventually becomes Zing's adopted “spiritual” home.

Globally Mediated

The main issue of Asian filmmaking continues to be deliberated today in settings such as the annual Asian Film Symposium in Singapore:

Producers of national cinemas are deeply aware of the need for film to serve as pop cultural inscriptions of social, cultural, political, and national memories. These inscriptions are discursive in the sense that they are constrained by various social, cultural, political, and ideological forces delimiting their nature and scope. . . . How do Asian filmmakers work with, within, or around these forces to inscribe their work with varied notions of social memory, be they institutionally sanctioned or critically alternative forms?¹⁸

Where, when, and how do Taiwanese Aborigines' notions of social memory enter into the media and cinematic discourse? Taiwan currently does not have an Aborigine filmmaker who has directed a feature narrative. But in July 2005, the first Aborigine-produced and run television station in Taiwan aired; supposedly it was the first such station in Asia as well. With all the various media outlets (e.g., print, radio, Web-based media) available to serve as mirrors of a society, how critical is a national cinema?

What is projected within a country's territory and what is projected outside of its borders have enormous social, cultural, and political impact. For countries like Taiwan—countries that occupy a precarious political status on the globe—a national cinema at times serves as an important diplomatic tool. It also serves as a counterprojection to the hegemonic image production by larger media corporations.

I am curious to see what a Taiwanese Aborigine director would create in this day and age of constant negotiation with various degrees of Han ethnic and cultural hegemony in Taiwan, a country trying to negotiate the various degrees of cultural hegemony on the world stage. How would an indigenous director resignify the codes of primitivism in translating their story onto the screen?

In our ever-more-saturated information age, one cannot downplay the power of cinema's projected image, as there always exists the danger of misrepresentation or underrepresentation, which often has detrimental effects. Therefore, at the critical heart of a developing national cinema there must be the sincere consideration and commitment to supporting the expression of a multiplicity of evolving voices and experiences. A sustainable infrastruc-

ture for recruiting and training Taiwanese Aborigine directors and providing effective funding for their works would be a fine place to start.

Notes

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1. Tseng Wen-Chen and Cho Li, interview by author, Taipei, October 29, 2006.
2. Chen Ting, "Looking for Love and Flying Fish in New Film by Tseng Wen-chen," *Taiwan Journal*, October 28, 2005, March 1, 2006, www.taiwancinema.com/ct.asp?xItem=52336&ctNode=124.
3. Cho Li, e-mail to author, March 3, 2006.
4. Ocean Deep Films/Lumiere Motion Pictures, English-language press kit for *Fishing Luck: To Be a Real Tao . . .*, 2005.
5. In May 2005, the Museum of Art in New York and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian showcased the first-ever presentation of first feature films by indigenous filmmakers from around the world, entitled First Nations/First Features.
6. Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 5.
7. Ocean Deep Films/Lumiere Motion Pictures, Official Web site for *Fishing Luck* film, www.fishingluck.com/en (accessed March 1, 2006).
8. Ocean Deep Films/Lumiere Motion Pictures, *Fishing Luck: To Be a Real Tao . . .*
9. Ibid.
10. Agenda notes for Senior Officials' Meeting, Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation in Gyeongju, Korea, "APEC Film Week: A Special Screening for APEC Films," September 13–14, 2005.
11. In this essay, *politics* refers to the foregrounding of political situations or dynamics where the struggles or tensions of power can be critically examined, questioned, and reevaluated.
12. Torgovnick further elaborates on the term *transcendental homelessness*, first coined by Georg Lukács in *Gone Primitive* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 188.
13. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu lucidly presents the complex relationship between nationhood and cinema for marginalized territories like Taiwan, especially in relationship to China, in his book *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 25.
14. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentricism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 27.
15. Ibid., 28.

16. Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of New Latin American Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1983), 17.
17. Taiwan Government Information Office, "Mass Media," January 8, 2008, July 5, 2008. www.gio.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=35711&ctNode=2597.
18. Substation Moving Images and Asian Film Archive, "5th Asian Film Symposium and Inaugural Forum on Asian Cinema, September 9–18, 2005, Singapore."