

## 5. Screening Atrocity

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NO FILM IN TAIWANESE CINEMA HISTORY has received as many accolades or as much criticism as *A City of Sadness* (henceforth referred to as *Sadness*), directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, the first Taiwanese film ever to win Venice's Golden Lion Award for Best Film. Immediately after its release in 1989, the film and its director came under scathing attack by critics from the entire range of Taiwan's political spectrum. A collection of essays entitled *The Death of New Cinema*, whose main target of criticism was Hou and his film,<sup>1</sup> was followed by another wave of articles to counter the charges. Almost all the latter, written in either Chinese or English, focus on specific aspects of the film to refute the critiques in *The Death of New Cinema*. One article even challenges Hou's detractors to watch the film a few more times so that they can appreciate his aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Some examine the film's technical aspects—Hou's use of sound, intertext, and photography—and others concentrate on issues raised in the film—questions of multiculturalism, identity politics, the myth of the motherland (that is, mainland China), representation of trauma, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

At the core of the criticism is the representation of history or, to be more exact, of the 2/28 Incident, but it also entails larger issues that have loomed over Taiwan's political and cultural landscapes since the lifting of martial law. That is, who owns this part of Taiwanese history, who is legitimate to speak for Taiwan and recapture its past on screen, and by what means? Implied in the critics' objections to Hou's film is a hegemonic interpretation of the incident, for their critique of his techniques is often indistinguishable from their criticism of the film's content. Here I give a brief account of the critics' complaints in regard

to Hou's failure to faithfully re-create the incident on the screen, not to rehash the now largely discredited criticism, but to highlight the difficulty of re-creating a forgotten historical event. I then shift my attention to certain scenes from *Sadness* to investigate the politics of filmic representation of atrocity. As a contrasting study of cinematic re-creation of the 2/28 Incident, the second half of this chapter analyzes Lin Cheng-sheng's *March of Happiness* (1999), particularly Lin's use of melodrama and treatment of violence. With the story ending on the eve of the 2/28 Incident, *March of Happiness* explores similar issues regarding this period of Taiwan's history, although it is noticeably more ambitious by including the last days of the colonial period, and its content and cinematic techniques follow a different approach.

#### A CITY OF SADNESS

Although many readers are familiar with *A City of Sadness*, a synopsis is in order here. *Sadness* centers on the Lin family, especially the sons: the eldest, Lin Wenxiong, is the owner of a nightclub called Little Shanghai; the second son is absent throughout the film because his whereabouts are unknown after having been drafted by the Japanese army to fight in the Pacific War; Wenliang, the third son, has returned as a traumatized war casualty from the mainland, where he worked as an interpreter for the Japanese; and the youngest son, Wenqing, is a deaf-mute photographer. The movie opens as Wenxiong's concubine is giving birth to a son during Emperor Hirohito's radio broadcast of Japan's surrender.<sup>4</sup> Wenliang later recovers from his trauma and becomes involved in shady business deals with the brother of Wenxiong's concubine, which, in turn, embroil him in disputes with a rival group, the Shanghai gang. The gang members use their connections with the Nationalist government's representative in Taiwan to falsely accuse Wenliang of being a Communist spy. Wenliang is arrested and jailed, forcing Wenxiong to seek help from the Shanghai gang. Although Wenliang is eventually released, he has been so traumatized by the brutality in prison that he loses his sanity and never recovers. Wenqing, who operates a photo studio away from home, is involved with radical friends who are dissatisfied with the new government. One of his friends is Hiroe, whose

sister, Hiromi,<sup>5</sup> works as a nurse in a local clinic and later becomes Wenqing's wife. Wenxiong is killed while defending the brother of his concubine. In the meantime, the 2/28 Incident and its aftermath are spreading across the island. Wenqing and his friends are arrested, but later he is released. Hiroe flees to the mountains to start a commune-like work-study group, but the location is discovered and all the members of the group are rounded up by Nationalist government soldiers. Wenqing and Hiromi plan to flee with their child but decide not to, and Wenqing is arrested again. The film ends with the Lin family sharing a meal, but the contrast with the opening scene is unmistakable, for the only members left are the aging patriarch, women, children, and the mentally unstable Wenliang.

### *Re-creating Historical Events*

Among the various venomous attacks on *A City of Sadness* and its director is the film's failure to properly represent history, as summarized by Robert Chi: "It does not show what it ought to show."<sup>6</sup> Hou is accused of "vulgarizing historical interpretation," owing to the "director's ignorance of historical facts." Hou, it is said, "should have worked harder and his think-tank should have been better equipped to deal with these issues" of representation: "Historical events are obscured, and not given in great enough detail, as the director has mistakenly believed that the audience was well-informed."<sup>7</sup> To be sure, these charges are to some extent personally motivated, but they nevertheless draw our attention to such questions as whether a film audience goes to the theater to learn about their own history or whether cinema should be required to teach the "correct" history. Apparently, implied in the criticism is the belief that an accurate version of historical truth can somehow be obtained through a cinematic rendition. Naive though these assumptions may appear to us now, when contextualized in Taiwan's history itself, the contention over the 2/28 Incident in *Sadness* is the very embodiment of government suppression and the annihilation of people's memory. That is, the oppressive atmosphere of the White Terror created a mnemonic vacuum, which people eagerly sought to fill with what they believed should be retained. In a word, *Sadness* itself is a victim of the White Terror.

The contention surrounding the original event and subsequent interpretations calls to mind Oliver Stone's *JFK*, which also has been severely criticized: "Much of the hostility seems to have been generated by his freehand mixing of documentary, feature, and pseudo-documentary footage."<sup>8</sup> Stone's cinematic techniques create an impression of historical veracity, with *JFK*'s "'desperate need' to recuperate a unified and fixed view of history so as to secure what is commonly thought to be the only foundation for the formation of national identity and community."<sup>9</sup> Although Stone's conspiracy theory has been attacked by film critics and historians as well as by former and current government officials, as Robert Toplin argues, "Stone's movie raised legitimate questions about the history of the cold war that had been the focus of attention by scholars and journalists for many years."<sup>10</sup> The movie's credibility has long been debated but nevertheless rekindled public interest in an important page in American history. Similarly, *Sadness*, despite the controversy, remains a milestone in Taiwan's understanding of and search for the past, however fragmentary that may be. Just as *JFK* may have served "as the beginning of a new understanding of Kennedy's assassination, not the end" and "offer[s] questions, not answers,"<sup>11</sup> *Sadness* functioned as a beginning for the Taiwanese, and its timely appearance helped ushered in an alternative approach to history.

*Sadness* has been accused of beautifying the image of the Japanese and their culture, thus portraying the Taiwanese as slaves to the colonial government. But Hou's critics tend to focus on the content, on what they regard as an incomplete, insufficient portrayal of the 2/28 Incident. Wu Qiyang, for instance, laments that *A City of Sadness* "should be an unprecedented breakthrough in Taiwanese film history, but what it manages to accomplish is merely opening up a narrow crack in a history covered up by time and political powers; [the Taiwanese people's] *historical experience does not appear in its entirety*."<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, we now realize that Wu has overlooked the opportunity that the film offered the audience, to confront the fact that no historical experience can ever be completely recaptured on screen (or in writing). Moreover, Wu's insistence on the impossible task of representing historical events in their entirety betrays his anxiety over the possibility that "history as drama is shot through with fiction and invention from the smallest details to largest events."<sup>13</sup> For him, obviously, the danger that fictional

invention may obscure the real facts about Taiwan's past can be eliminated through an unadulterated, cinematic totality. We could label such blind faith in verity as *the fallacy of facts*: "Facts are supposed to provide the basis for arbitrating among the variety of different meanings that different groups *can* assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons. But the facts are a function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have."<sup>14</sup>

Related to the attack on *Sadness's* incomplete historical representation is a concern about the lack of explanation; that is, in the critics' view, the film ought to have presented a detailed and complete explanation of how and why the 2/28 Incident happened. Wu Qiyao complains that "the limited viewpoint cannot provide an internally consistent explanation [for historical events]. Therefore, in the movie, we see suffering and oppression, but cannot see the causes of suffering or the external forces of oppression."<sup>15</sup> Lu Kuang makes a similar charge: "When the movie is over, we still don't know what some of the characters did to be arrested or what the 2/28 Incident was all about."<sup>16</sup> In Chi Yanqi's denunciation, "The dissidents in *A City of Sadness* are so vacuous and ignorant that their romanticism becomes [an] unrealistic, naive illusion and nauseating cliché."<sup>17</sup> Obviously, disregarding the fact that cinema is not a tutorial on history, Chi and many like-minded critics would like to have had more scenes devoted to the leftist intellectuals, Hiroe and Wenqing, and perhaps more of their actual actions against the persecution of the Taiwanese. Furthermore, Wenqing and Hiromi's romantic relationship only aggravates these critics' displeasure over the director's intentional elision of history, which is reflected in Liang Xinhua's view: "Regrettably, the director and the scriptwriter were completely incapable of conducting a dialogue with history to develop a broad and profound historical view for their contemporaries; instead they escape into an unchanging and romantic fantasy world of aestheticism to displace their views and reflections on society and history."<sup>18</sup>

The most serious assault is directed against Hou Hsiao-hsien's political motivation and ideology. Although for Lu Kuang the film does not express a clear-cut political ideology of a pro-Taiwanese and antigovernment stance in re-creating the scenes of Taiwanese suffering, Mi Zou criticizes the director's view of history, claiming that it

is similar to what was proposed by the then president, Lee Teng-hui, who exhorted the Taiwanese to be forward looking and leave the incident to historians.<sup>19</sup> Adding to this scathing criticism, Chi Yanqi believes that *Sadness* completely distorts the historical facts by following the official explanation, that the incident was instigated by Taiwanese Communists and Taiwanese mobs:

The so-called government corruption and social injustice are presented only through the cynical narration of the characters, and the suppression of the 2/28 Incident is represented in the style of “re-counting.” . . . The movie does not seriously question, let alone subvert and critique, the official assessment of the incident. In contrast, the scene in which the Taiwanese beat up the mainlanders uses “visually veritable” images as proof. Moreover, the Taiwanese who carry out the beating are fierce looking, with their hair, long, scraggly, like hooligans or an angry mob. No one in the audience would believe that these people are rebelling because they suffer oppression.<sup>20</sup>

We can surmise that taken as a whole, the critics’ dissatisfaction with the depiction of the 2/28 Incident in *Sadness* derives from a false belief that historical events can be faithfully represented and that there is a proper way for historical representation in films (and other media as well, of course). Specifically, and as far as this chapter is concerned, the main contention concerns the power of visual dramatization versus verbal narration. Moreover, even though most critics from both camps question the possibility of fully representing historical events, little is said about whether atrocious acts should even be enacted on screen at all, for they seem to be more preoccupied with the *accuracy* than with the *legitimacy* of representation.

### *Witnessing and Representing Atrocity*

The long passage just quoted regarding the scene in which the Taiwanese beat up mainlanders is often cited as the most glaring evidence that Hou does not give a balanced, impartial depiction, since the Taiwanese are cast in a negative light. Compounding this perceived biased

representation is the lack of visual dramatization of the massacre of the Taiwanese. That is, the image of the Taiwanese as victimizers is dramatized, but the image of the Taiwanese as victims of government brutality on a much larger scale is revealed only through narration. We recall that those Taiwanese who were furious over the injustice inflicted by the Nationalist government sought out mainlanders for revenge. The governor-general, Chen Yi, then retaliated by sending troops recently transported from the mainland out to the streets, where they began indiscriminately shooting everyone in sight. What bothers Chi Yanqi and others is the different ways in which these two violent incidents are presented to the audience. For the first incident, we see Taiwanese carrying clubs and scythes; chasing passengers, presumed to be mainlanders, off the train; and beating them. Then the camera cuts to the stunned expression on Hiroe's face, followed by a scene on the train of a different group of Taiwanese interrogating Wenqing. Under the pressure, Wenqing, who has been deaf since the age of eight, blurts out that he is Taiwanese. His interrogator then switches to Japanese, and when he gets no response, he is about to hit Wenqing, and if it were not for Hiroe's timely appearance, Wenqing would have suffered the same fate as the mainlanders.

At first glance, it is not surprising that some Taiwanese critics would consider this scene inflammatory and prejudicial. But the scene's significance changes drastically if we look at the entire sequence: after the outbreak of the incident, Wenqing and Hiroe go to Taipei; injured mainlanders are sent to Hiromi's clinic; Wenqing returns and seeks out Hiromi at the clinic, and as he writes to tell her what he witnessed, he faints; Governor-General Chen Yi gives a speech on the radio regarding the well-intentioned measures taken by his administration; Hiromi goes to the studio to see Wenqing, who then writes out what he saw, which is followed by a reenactment of the "infamous" scenes on the train; and finally, in a night scene, a seriously injured Hiroe appears in Wenqing's studio and tells Wenqing and Hiromi about the mass arrests and killing ordered by Chen Yi. Of particular importance is the sequence of these scenes: a static shot of the village rooftops seemingly enveloped by Chen Yi's heavily accented Mandarin broadcast, Wenqing's written account, and the dramatization of violence on the train, followed by Hiroe's account. These segments raise questions concerning the witnessing and relating historical events.

We need to examine exactly what is conveyed by the scene of the Taiwanese mob's violence against the mainlanders and Wenqing. Hou's detractors have castigated him for portraying the Taiwanese as hooligans or an angry mob and "no one in the audience would believe that these people are rebelling because they suffer oppression."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Taiwanese are the victimizers in this scene, but its significance changes dramatically when we consider perspective, the narrative point of view. Virtually all the critics consider the dramatization to be part of Wenqing's recollection, and therefore the dramatization of violence against the mainlanders serves to denigrate the Taiwanese. But because Wenqing is a deaf-mute, this scene could not possibly be part of his recollection. The camera angle and the place where Wenqing is sitting on the train make it impossible for him to see what is happening off the train, let alone see the stunned look on Hiroe's face. After Wenqing is rescued by Hiroe on the train, Hiroe goes on to explain angrily that Wenqing cannot hear them: "He's been deaf since the age of eight. How could he hear what you're saying to him?" Simply put, Wenqing, who is looking out the window, could not have heard what Hiroe is telling his assailants about his hearing problem and then recount that to Hiroe's sister, Hiromi. While some might dismiss this incongruity as a directorial flaw, I propose that we look at the film as it is presented and focus on the issue of perspective. Since Wenqing cannot have seen or heard what is happening behind him, the train scene cannot possibly be presented from his point of view. I believe that juxtaposed with Chen Yi's broadcast about protecting the law-abiding citizens, which is meant to deceive the Taiwanese, this scene dramatizes the official version that the incident was largely the handiwork of Communists and hooligans, thereby absolving the government of its responsibility for having failed the Taiwanese.

Of particular interest is Wenqing's recounting. Christopher Lupke argues that "just as the deaf/mute cannot speak or hear, his imperfect fulfillment of his duty as witness points us toward the broader question of silencing dissent in Taiwan, both then and throughout the Chiang Era."<sup>22</sup> Chen Ruxiu also observes that this scene illustrates the fate of the Taiwanese as a devastating historical tragedy witnessed by a deaf-mute, which, in turn, symbolizes the suppression of the incident.<sup>23</sup> The sense of tragedy is magnified when we consider that the Taiwanese, symbolized by Wenqing, cannot talk about the incident, so that what

is left is written words (quasi-history); but then even the person who witnesses and records the event is “disappeared” at the end. Furthermore, the scene also makes an implicit comment on how historical knowledge is transmitted. That is, written words, including memoirs and eyewitness accounts, are what we have to make sense of the incident. But written records—whether objective or personal/subjective history—always are selective.

Besides the question of whether historical events can be reproduced in their entirety, one of the major issues regarding representation of the 2/28 Incident in *Sadness* is the different modes of portraying violence against the Taiwanese. Some critics contend that while the Taiwanese assault on the mainlanders is *dramatized* for the audience, the scenes in which native Taiwanese were massacred because they simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time are *narrated* by the injured Hiroe, not visually enacted. These critics, it seems, would prefer to have an equal length of visualized violence against the Taiwanese to demonstrate what Hiroe relates: “Chen Yi sent troops out, arresting and killing people along the way.” The fact that Hiroe, the narrator of the violence against the Taiwanese, is an eyewitness and a casualty himself already “implies” that atrocious acts are being carried out. His narration also makes an oblique comment on the lasting effect of the incident. When the Nationalist government tried to erase records of the incident by forbidding the people to talk about it, personal accounts related in private, as in the scene at Wenqing’s studio, were the only means of transmission.

The detractors’ preference obviously derives from the tendency to privilege visuality over orality, without regard for the possibility that not all violence can (or must) be dramatized on the screen in order to convey the degree of suffering and tragedy. Perhaps Mirian Bratu Hansen’s critique of *Schindler’s List* is applicable here, when she argues that the film “does not seek to negate the representational, iconic power of filmic images, but rather bank on this power.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps what the critics from *The Death of New Cinema* group would prefer is for Hou to exploit the iconic power of filmic images and hence sensationalize the brutality against the Taiwanese. When dealing with the re-creation of atrocious acts, we should not rely on familiar tropes and common techniques to narrate an event that will likely never be fully understood, so that we are not left with only scenes of violence that

neither enrich nor augment our knowledge. Even the lofty notion that “screen violence provides a viewer with the opportunity to purge hostile feelings in the safe realm of art”<sup>25</sup> rings hollow, for such an ideologically and politically motivated proposition for screen violence is, ultimately, gratuitous: “Movie violence must contain multitudinous meanings if it hopes to avoid the prisons of ideology and cliché, if it seeks to draw anything more than a distant, formalized response, if it wants to outlast its moment.”<sup>26</sup>

This highly contested scene is emblematic of Hou’s directorial style, for he “marshaled a variety of idiosyncratic techniques and production decisions to sculpt for the spectator a rendering of the February 28th Incident that is willfully mutilated, establishing from the outset and throughout the film that any attempt to apprehend the unvarnished truth concerning the liquidation of dissent on Taiwan is practically impossible.”<sup>27</sup> Another example that shows the film’s intention to avoid the common (Hollywood) technique of sensational dramatization can be found in a largely ignored scene, in which the director deals similarly with the fate of another intellectual, Lin Laoshi, or Teacher Lin. Lin is a friend of Hiroe’s, whom Hiroe introduces to Wenqing and other leftist intellectuals. When Wenqing returns from Taipei, he recounts to Hiromi in writing that Lin has been going to the meeting hall every day. Later, while they are tending to his injuries, Hiroe tells Hiromi and Wenqing that Lin has disappeared and that members of the settlement committee have been arrested. Not only does Lin’s appearance foreshadow Wenqing’s and Hiroe’s arrests, but it also makes yet another oblique comment on the government’s persecution, without dramatizing his arrest and possible execution. Visual dramatization may not necessarily be effective, for often the unrepresented can most eloquently convey the unspeakable.

### *Writing, Reading, and Recounting Atrocity*

One of Hou’s critics has complained that “whenever issues of politics are about to appear, the camera quickly turns away from real political oppression and violent events to mountains, oceans and fishing boats, which is an attempt to *displace* and *misplace* the actual problems with the beauty of mountains and rivers and static scenery.”<sup>28</sup> Although

largely duplicating the criticism referred to in the previous section, such a stricture itself appears to be misplaced when we examine the scenes in which the Nationalist government action against the Taiwanese is depicted: Wenqing's arrest and time in prison (narrated through a voice-over of Hiromi reading a letter from Axue, Wenxiong's daughter); the released Wenqing taking a letter and the personal effects of an executed cellmate to the latter's family; Axue relating to Hiromi that the restaurant Little Shanghai was shut down in March, when many people were killed and Wenxiong's friend was arrested; a night scene in which a stranger delivers news of Hiroe's arrest; and, finally, Nationalist soldiers rounding up Hiroe and other dissidents. All these scenes involve reading, writing, and recounting, which is *Sadness's* signature technique of indirect treatment of the incident.

June Yip has argued that Hou's movies, especially *Sadness*, should not be treated as historical but as historiographical films.<sup>29</sup> That is, *Sadness* is not so much about re-creating the 2/28 Incident on screen as it is an exploration of ways in which historical events are represented. I would take this idea further to concentrate on how *Sadness* comments on writing (albeit in filmic language) about atrocity. As denounced and praised by critics in both camps, *Sadness* not only uses a deaf-mute photographer to witness and partially recount historical event but also heavily relies on Hiromi's diary and letter in the form of a voice-over to narrate political and social situations during the 2/28 Incident. The device of a woman narrating events is first attacked by Mi Zou, who believes that the film implies that women cannot be part of history: "Hiromi is simply recounting Wenqing's life; we rarely get a sense of her own view or value judgment."<sup>30</sup> Although appearing to praise Hiromi for her characterization of the suffering wife of a victim of the 2/28 Incident, Liao Ping-hui regards her role as a conventional strategy:

It is in fact a very traditional and passive approach to use a feminine means to wrap and cover up history, so that people can continue to endure and survive with the wound and continue to live. This is perhaps why Chu T'ien-wen and Hou Hsiao-hsien chose Hiromi to show how a person can be completely helpless in a political situation, but they represent current conditions in a nostalgic, uncritical attitude.<sup>31</sup>

Predictably, this “failure” has been subsequently rehabilitated by scholars and film critics. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh uses Hiromi’s diary to show how the film subverts instructional, official history.<sup>32</sup> June Yip is even more direct when she contends that “the effect of Hou’s insistence on filtering all public historical events through language, as well as through the subjectivities of individual characters, therefore, is to remind us that all historical knowledge is mediated through human acts of narration and to underscore the idea that the history is, after all, storytelling.”<sup>33</sup> As we can see, for the detractors, individual characters like Hiromi, a character on the periphery of historical events, cannot possibly convey the intensity of the detrimental effects on the Taiwanese. However, if we can agree that Hou Hsiao-hsien neither is interested in re-creating history nor intends to represent the 2/28 Incident via familiar tropes of dramatization, then Hiromi’s diary and letter reading become an effective conduit for illustrating the effects of the 2/28 Incident and the subsequent crackdown. Although we still have questions about women’s agency in the torrents of history, as mentioned in chapter 2, women become the primary transmitters of historical memory in Taiwan precisely because most of the men were “disappeared.”

Furthermore, Hiromi’s diary and letters (to and from Axue) serve a metaphorical purpose in commenting on the means through which cases of extrajudicial persecution are remembered in the oppressive political climate of the White Terror. When the Taiwanese were forbidden to openly discuss the incident and other abuses of civil liberties, such private media as diaries and letters became the only means of keeping the memory alive. When the memory is then conveyed through Hiromi to us, it takes on a verbal form akin to oral transmission, which was the only means left to the Taiwanese to even become aware of the incident.<sup>34</sup> The personal act of keeping a diary is not so much a comment on Hiromi’s lack of agency as a manifestation of the fear of the omnipresent censorial apparatus. This is best illustrated in a scene in which Hiromi visits Wenqing’s family and Axue tells her why they shut down the restaurant and that her father’s friend, a Mr. Xu, also was arrested. At that moment, her aunt—possibly Wenliang’s wife—effectively shuts her up by simply saying, “Axue!” The fear of saying the wrong thing, which could invite further calamity, is palpable in that single utterance of the girl’s name.

Hou's avoidance of dramatizing violence without flinching from confronting the government's suppression is best exemplified in a night scene in which the news of Hiroe's arrest is relayed to Hiromi and Wenqing: a nearly pitch-black setting in which we can barely make out a dark figure knocking on the door. Wenqing appears, turns on the light, and opens the door; the man, a messenger, takes out a letter and gives it to Wenqing; and Wenqing makes some gestures, obviously inviting the man inside, but the man waves him off and quickly disappears into the dark night. The dark night and the faceless messenger conjure up a sense of secrecy with a tinge of danger heightened by a dog barking. Except for the barking dog and the knocking on the door, this scene is played in complete silence, with no verbal exchange, and yet it is powerful enough to convey the oppressive atmosphere of the White Terror.<sup>35</sup> We do not need to be told how risky it would have been for the messenger to deliver the letter, for Wenqing already has been arrested once and soon will be again.

The sense of omnipresent danger is best communicated to the audience in another sequence of scenes, also without verbal exchanges. We see a railroad track and hear the whistle and rumbling of a coming train; between the spaces of the moving train cars we spot Wenqing, Hiromi, and their infant son; and when the train passes, the family, with their suitcases, is in plain view. We later learn from Hiromi's letter to Axue that they planned to flee after Hiroe's arrest but decided not to because they knew they had no place to hide. Just as Hiroe was ferreted out from his hideout in the mountains, Wenqing and Hiromi would never be able to escape the net cast by the Nationalist government even if they did manage to find shelter. The aborted escape is criticized for its obscurity, for "even the most imaginative audience cannot possibly figure out that they are contemplating flight."<sup>36</sup> It is unnecessary to point out that this critic missed Hiromi's revelation to Axue, but such a blunder is symptomatic of Hou's detractors, for they fail to understand that *Sadness* is more than the sum of its parts. The critics ignore that "anything other than a virtual copy of the real event must emphasize certain aspects of the events and neglect others"<sup>37</sup> and search in vain for a faithful re-creation of the 2/28 Incident. Even though they are keenly aware of the incident's historical significance to Taiwanese society, they forget that traumatic events—"events of such magnitude or singularity that they can neither be completely

forgotten nor adequately remembered—can only find their appropriately tenuous representation in the ‘de-realization’ effected by . . . fragmentation.”<sup>38</sup> With a fuller understanding of the fragmentary nature of representation, perhaps a discursive battle no longer needs to be waged over the ownership of this part of Taiwanese history and the legitimate interpreting and representing authority of the events.

#### MARCH OF HAPPINESS

As if to respond to some of the issues regarding the interpretation and representation of the 2/28 Incident in *A City of Sadness*, ten years later, in 1999, Lin Cheng-sheng’s *March of Happiness* (henceforth referred to as *Happiness*) revisited the site of the incident, the Tianma Café (Tianma chafang, also the Chinese title of the film). Perhaps owing to changes in Taiwanese politics, culture, and society over the preceding decade, *Happiness* attracted little critical attention in Taiwan, even though its approach to the incident is more pointed than that of *Sadness*. The film was invited to all the major film festivals (Cannes, Nantes, Toronto, Pushan) and was selected to represent Taiwan to compete for Best Foreign Film of 2000 at the Academy Awards. As I have written elsewhere, international film festivals and awards are not always the best indicators of a film’s achievement.<sup>39</sup> But the government’s attitude toward *Happiness*, in contrast with *Sadness*’s initial concern over censorship, provides a yardstick for us to measure the creative freedom that directors (and writers) now enjoy in approaching the formerly taboo topic of the 2/28 Incident. Therefore, I will examine how *Happiness* tackles the portrayal of this event, which will contribute to our understanding of the complicated cinematic re-creations of the individual in a violent historical event.

The differences between these two films are neither superficial nor insignificant; we need only read a prominent film critic’s comment to realize the complexity: “It is certainly audacious of Lin Cheng-sheng to try to follow in the footsteps of [A] *City of Sadness*, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s account of the same period of Taiwanese history. Instead of confronting history directly, as Hou did in his own film, Lin tries to mix it with allegory.”<sup>40</sup> For Hou’s detractors, whose criticism of *Sadness* I cited earlier, it is disputable whether Hou did indeed confront

history directly, but the persistent reference to confronting history directly has become an albatross around both directors' necks. The contrasting reception of these two films, made ten years apart, seems to have become its own theater of the absurd: the earlier movie—*Sadness*—was accused of eliding and failing to confront history but was praised ten years later for confronting history and used to disparage the second movie—*Happiness*—for failing to confront history. The strange twists and turns of these two films demand that they be examined together, not to prove that one is better than the other, but to show how historical events such as the 2/28 Incident can be represented differently, as evidenced in the contrasting words in the titles: “sadness” and “happiness.”<sup>41</sup> In this section, I analyze *Happiness* from three different aspects: Lin Cheng-sheng's use of melodrama, the portrayal of violence, and the focus on the individual.

*March of Happiness* begins in the last days of Japanese colonial rule and ends during the outbreak of the 2/28 Incident, with its main plot revolving around Ayu, the daughter of a successful fish-ball wholesaler, and Ajin, an intellectual who has traveled to Tokyo and Shanghai. They meet at the Tianma Café, where Ayu and other young artists plan their stage plays in the back room. When Allied fighter planes begin bombing Taipei, the theater group is disbanded and its members return to their respective hometowns. Ayu and Ajin correspond with each other and fall in love. When the Japanese surrender, the members regroup at the café but are prohibited by the Nationalist officials from staging their old play, just as the Japanese had done earlier. After the owner of the café, Zhan Tianma, intercedes on the artists' behalf, they are allowed to resume production but only to put on patriotic Chinese plays. A mainland soldier, Xiaobao, is particularly upset with the play's heavy Japanese flavor as well as anything else associated with Japan. One day, when the soldier is meeting with an uncle at the café, a former Japanese official comes to bid farewell to Zhan Tianma. After the Japanese leaves, Xiaobao follows him out and shoots and kills him. In the meantime, Ayu's father wants her to marry Xie Renchang, the son of a doctor in town and, without regard for her objections, completes the engagement. Left with no choice, Ayu and Ajin decide to elope, and they choose the fateful date of February 27, 1947.

Earlier that day, the soldiers accompanying government agents of the Alcohol and Tobacco Monopoly Bureau had seriously injured a

woman cigarette vendor and matchmaker for Ayu and Renchang, and also killed a bystander. A group of soldiers storm onto the stage at the theater, and one of them, gun in hand, orders the actors and actresses to stop. Ajin, who was on his way to the pier for his rendezvous with Ayu, stops to look for his guitar upstairs at the theater. When he walks out from behind a curtain to leave, his suitcase bumps into an object. The noise draws the attention of the gun-wielding soldier, who fires and kills Ajin. Meanwhile, Ayu has arrived at the pier, where she waits patiently for Ajin, unaware that he will never come. The film ends with a scene of Taiwanese throwing objects out of a building (presumably the Monopoly Bureau office) and intertext about the March massacre and the subsequent forty years of martial law.

### *On the Verge of Melodrama*

In the review cited earlier, Shelly Kraicer refers to an article by Jacques Mandelbaum, in which “Mandelbaum believes that Lin is convincing at melodrama, and picks out a strand of political engagement in all of Lin’s films (the problematic of a divided China, which he [Mandelbaum] sees mapped out in a particular tension between the individual and the community in each film) that is directly confronted in the present work.”<sup>42</sup> Mandelbaum is astute in detecting traces of melodrama in *Happiness*, for the film does exhibit striking characteristics of the genre, which, according to Thomas Elsaesser, derives its “dramatic force from the conflict between an extreme and highly individualized form of moral idealism in the heroes . . . and a thoroughly corrupt yet seemingly omnipotent class. The melodramatic elements are clearly visible in the plots, which revolve around family relationships, star-crossed lovers and forced marriage.”<sup>43</sup> Owing to theoretical issues, however, I argue that *Happiness* falls short of a full-blown melodrama; yet it is precisely this position of being on the verge of melodrama that a profound sense of tragedy of the 2/28 Incident can emerge without resorting to gory, overly sentimental, or sensationalized depictions.

In discussing Henry James in his pioneering work, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, literary scholar Peter Brooks lists some of the basic elements of melodrama: “the confronted power of evil and goodness, the sense of hazard and clash, the intensification and heightening of

experience corresponding to dream and desire.”<sup>44</sup> These ideas are relevant to my analysis of *Happiness*, even though the subject of Brooks’s study is literary melodrama and he places the origin of melodrama in the French Revolution. Later scholars in literary and cinematic fields have revised and augmented some of Brooks’s arguments. Christine Gledhill’s edited collection of essays, for instance, includes studies of historical, domestic, material, and psychological melodramas, thus broadening the scope of the approach of melodrama to film studies.<sup>45</sup> But questions still remain as to whether the theory of melodrama can be applied to non-Western films, since the subject matter of all these essays is Western films. In summarizing Brooks’s connection between the emergence of melodrama and the rise of postrevolutionary bourgeois consciousness, Linda Williams cites Brooks’s argument that “late eighteenth and nineteenth-century melodrama arose to fill the vacuum of a post-revolutionary world where traditional imperatives of truth and ethics had been violently questioned and yet in which there was still a need for truth and ethics.”<sup>46</sup>

Given this culturally and historically specific context, it is understandable that some might challenge the applicability of the concepts of melodrama to a Taiwanese film or to any non-Western film, for that matter. William Rothman effectively critiques Brooks’s cultural and historical premises while essentially arguing that various forms of melodrama might emerge in different parts of the world.<sup>47</sup> E. Ann Kaplan also interrogates the relevance of Western melodrama theories to Chinese cinema. Even though she reiterates Brooks’s claim of the origin of Western melodrama and how it came out of the bourgeoisie’s desire to be distinguished from the working class and the aristocrats,<sup>48</sup> Kaplan acknowledges the presence of the characteristics of melodrama and their subversive power in recent Chinese cinema. I will not discuss here the origins of melodrama, but I will borrow some of Brooks’s and others’ ideas to demonstrate how melodrama and its characteristics can be useful in analyzing Lin Cheng-sheng’s approach to represent the tragedy of the 2/28 Incident, for melodrama has “long served as a crucial social barometer during times of ideological crisis, making it as a genre a valuable object of study for political analysis.”<sup>49</sup>

One of the prominent features of melodrama is its use of the Manichaean polarity of good versus evil; consequently, there are victims and villains who play out the struggle between virtue and vice, in

which the former triumphs over the latter. Understandably, in such a scheme, a happy ending is in order.<sup>50</sup> For the greater part of the film, *Happiness* follows a similar scheme but pulls back at the last moment when the good are not vindicated and a happy ending is aborted. In order to achieve the sense of tragedy,<sup>51</sup> *Happiness* complicates the Manichaean polarity by doubling the binary opposition with a parallel between the nation and the family, thereby mingling domestic melodrama with historical melodrama. In the domestic milieu, as shown in Elsaesser's description quoted at the beginning of this section, Ayu and Ajin, the star-crossed lovers, face her tyrannical father's objections to their romantic relationship. Moreover, Ayu is being forced to marry the doctor's son, whom her father clearly believes is a more suitable match for the daughter of a successful businessman. Profit is his principal concern,<sup>52</sup> and he has a mind for efficiency, for he constantly exhorts his employees to work faster and has his daughter help out at the shop. Although we would be hard-pressed to call her father evil in the conventional sense of the word, there is nevertheless a polarity between patriarchal order and individual freedom to choose, common in domestic melodrama. Tyranny, particularly the patriarchal kind, must be defied, so Ayu and Ajin decide to elope.<sup>53</sup>

Polarity also exists in the national/historical realm in *Happiness*, but in a more complex configuration. In the early part of the movie, the Taiwanese theater group skirts the Japanese colonial censorship by having two different plays ready. Two lookouts are posted outside the theater, and when they spot Japanese colonial officials, one of them notifies the actors to change costumes and switch to a Japanese play while the other delays the officials' entrance by offering them cigarettes. The oppressive domination of colonial authority controls every aspect of Taiwanese life, but this kind of tyranny can be resisted only through circuitous devices, not challenged, and needs the full cooperation of an understanding audience. Hence the Taiwanese, represented by the audience and the cast as innocent colonial subjects, are confronted with the indomitable power of the colonial censorial apparatus. Later, when the Nationalists arrive with a similarly oppressive mechanism of control, the group is forced to stop indefinitely, as the official reason for halting the performance is malaria. No one is given any clear indication as to whether or not this is true and, if it is, when malaria will be eradicated so the performance can resume.

Again, the political tyranny of the Nationalist government cannot be challenged directly. But this time, the old ruse of double play is replaced by rendering the cast instead as hooligans in order for the performance to continue. Zhan Tianma,<sup>54</sup> speaking through an interpreter, lays out the situation for the Nationalist official: hooligans need something to occupy their time and energy so they will not cause trouble; therefore, it is to the government's advantage to allow the theater group to continue. In other words, the Taiwanese Zhan has to debase his own compatriots by referring to them as hooligans in exchange for artistic freedom.<sup>55</sup>

The Nationalist government, represented by Xiaobao, is clearly the villain, the agent of terror. Although the director attempted to psychologize and rationalize the first instance of violence, the shooting death of the Japanese colonial officer by Xiaobao (a mainland soldier who fought the Japanese before coming to Taiwan), Xiaobao is portrayed as someone full of hatred for the Japanese and, to a lesser degree, for the Taiwanese. Before killing the Japanese, he complains to his uncle that the war with Japan has ruined his chance of getting married and having a family. After threatening everyone in the coffee shop with his gun, he runs out and lies in wait for the Japanese. The shooting and killing of Ajin appears to be an accident, but the officer is distrustful and permanently on edge. The lack of any repercussion from the senseless killing of two men implies the government's complicity, which intensifies the polarity between the innocent Taiwanese and the nefarious Nationalist government.

When we compare these two binary oppositions—patriarchal tyranny versus individual freedom, and corrupt government versus helpless Taiwanese—the sense of tragedy and the sheer weight of indomitable historical forces come through clearly. On the one hand, in the personal realm, patriarchy is defied, but in the national arena, the tyrannical government cannot be challenged. On the other hand, the attempt to defy the patriarchal oppression accidentally brings forth an irreparable outcome of government suppression: the death of Ajin. The two strands of melodrama—domestic and historical—develop separately at first and then gradually merge and culminate in the elopement and the death of Ajin. Peter Brooks's characterization of melodrama best illustrates what *Happiness* accomplishes by bordering on the edge of melodrama: "The polarization of good and evil

works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order."<sup>56</sup> While in the domestic setting, we can safely argue that the young lovers triumph over the father, but both the film and Taiwan's historical reality inform us that a totalitarian government demands the complete obliteration of personal freedom and civil liberties.

### *Violence and Historical Accuracy*

In the first part of this chapter, I raised the issue of the legitimacy of representing violence on the screen. Hou Hsiao-hsien and his *Sadness* were censured for visually dramatizing Taiwanese attacking mainlanders but having Hiroe narrate the massacre of Taiwanese verbally and thus obliquely. For some critics, this complaint derives from an anxiety over the accuracy of representation; for others, from their respective political stances. Sympathizers and proponents of Hou's film cited the nascent relaxation of censorship in the early days after martial law was lifted (1989) as evidence of his cautious approach to the 2/28 Incident in the film. To be sure, after forty years of government suppression of dissent, the Taiwanese were accustomed to censoring themselves, but I would argue that film directors like Hou were keenly aware of these sensitive issues of representing violence. A closer look at the re-creation of violence on screen in Lin's film (1999) will be helpful in expanding our conception of the dramatization of violence.

The first violent scene in *Happiness*, the shooting death of the former Japanese colonial official, comes as a surprise, although we have been given hints that Xiaobao is agitated at the theater, where mainland officials are invited to watch the new play that the Taiwanese put on to celebrate the end of the war and the departure of the Japanese. Later he also complains about the war with Japan and with the Communists on the mainland and points his gun wildly at everyone in the café when he orders the Japanese to leave. As he ambushes the Japanese in the alley, we sense that something violent is about to happen; nevertheless, when he fires two shots at the fleeing man, we still are shocked, partly because the story thus far is largely centered on the romance between Ayu and Ajin. Although some critics may contend that the

ruthless shooting death of a fleeing Japanese portrays the mainland soldier in a negative light, the audience never actually sees the Japanese going down, a conclusion that we infer only from the circumstances and the gunshots. Moreover, we should consider this scene as more symbolic, that these shots are the warning signs of a different era, serving as an effective and symbolic ending of the Japanese colonial rule and the dawn of an even more violent (albeit implied) time.

The shooting scene is used to comment on the political situation in Taiwan. We see the camera cut back and forth between the scene in the alley and the scene at a barbershop; Zhan Tianma, the owner of the café, is having his face shaved while talking with someone (presumably the barber). The latter is concerned that all “these people from the Motherland” carry firearms and that a trivial altercation could end in serious gunplay. Zhan then offers his own opinion that only those who are afraid would try to scare others. Just as he utters this fatally accurate comment, gunshots are heard in the distance. The first violent scene, therefore, is more likely the director’s interpretation of historical events, a comment in hindsight.

The second violent incident, the cigarette-confiscating scene, is understandably the film’s most controversial aspect. Shelly Kraicer complains that “it seems awfully nervy, if not downright heavy-handed, for Lin to include as a main character the famous cigarette vendor who was attacked by Kuomintang [Guomintang] troops.”<sup>57</sup> The cigarette vendor indeed plays an important role, for she also is the matchmaker, a symbolic force that ends the lovers’ future, just as the real-life Lin Jiang Mai was the accidental catalyst that set the tragedy in motion. Yet it is questionable whether the vendor in the film, played by Grace Chen, is meant to represent the real-life Lin Jiang Mai. For one thing, her name is never used in the film except when she is beaten and Ayu’s father runs over to check on her. Even in that scene, the Grace Chen character is referred to only as “Ah-mai.” We may infer that “Ah-mai” is Lin Jiang Mai, since a typical Taiwanese way of nicknaming someone is to add “Ah-” to the last character of the person’s name. Even so, an audience with passing knowledge of the incident, unlike those of *Sadness* ten years earlier, knows that the scene is historically inaccurate. The real-life Lin Jiang Mai was accompanied by her young children, a daughter and a son, when her money was snatched away and she was beaten. She is often portrayed in his-

torical accounts as a poor, even dirty-looking, woman struggling to raise her children. In *Happiness*, the Grace Chen character is radically different from the iconic woman,<sup>58</sup> whose personal tragedy is forever implicated in the national trauma of the 2/28 Incident, whereas the historical event caused irreparable damage to her family.<sup>59</sup>

It is difficult not to wonder whether the Grace Chen character really is a filmic duplicate of the real-life Lin Jiang Mai and, if so, how we should interpret such a cinematic addition. It also is easy to fault Lin Cheng-sheng for letting his political ideology override artistic considerations. It may have been ill advised for Lin to add such an iconic, historical figure and a historical setting—the Tianma Café—to a fictional work. Conversely, all of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s characters in *Sadness* are fabricated.<sup>60</sup> I do believe, however, that it is not important whether or not the Grace Chen character is the real-life Lin Jiang Mai, for one of the film’s central themes is a feeling of the inevitable force of history in the sense that “the future will come, no matter what.”<sup>61</sup> Shelly Kraicer put it most lucidly by saying that “this stratagem [of adding the woman cigarette vendor] telegraphs, like the elopement date itself, exactly what is going to happen in the film long before it actually transpires.”<sup>62</sup> Just as Ayu and Ajin are swept away in the torrent of historical events, the cigarette vendor, whether or not it is Lin Jiang Mai, can only succumb to a force more powerful than an individual.

The shooting death of Ajin constitutes the last scene of violence in the film, one in which the film’s central theme emerges most clearly. Unlike the first scene, in which Xiaobao shoots and kills the Japanese colonial officer, Ajin’s death is an accident. He is ready to leave for the pier but is delayed by the search for his cherished guitar, which he had used to compose the song of hope, “March of Happiness.” Ajin and Ayu would have been safely on the boat if the Nationalist soldiers had not chosen that moment to burst onto the stage, if Ajin had not emerged at that exact moment, and if he had not knocked something over. These “ifs” correspond to Bill Nichols’s term of the conditional mood, “devoted to matters of suppositions.”<sup>63</sup> Nichols also proposes another linguistic term, the subjunctive mood, which is particularly relevant to and illuminating in approaching *Happiness*, for the mood is “a set of verb forms that represents an attitude toward or concern with a denoted act or state not as fact but as something entertained in

thought as contingent or possible.”<sup>64</sup> Framed in the subjunctive mood, the shooting death of Ajin can be regarded as a directorial meditation on what could have been and what should have been. Ajin and Ayu should have been able to elope, just as the beating of Lin Jiang Mai could have been avoided, and the massacre should not have happened. In short, Taiwan could have and should have been a much better place, and that, I would venture, is the central message of *March of Happiness*.

### *Focus on Individuals*

When *A City of Sadness* was first shown in Taipei, many who expected to see a cinematic re-creation of the 2/28 Incident were disappointed; some, including critics of *The Death of New Cinema*, castigated the misrepresentation of the film as a movie about the 2/28 Incident for foreign audiences. They were dissatisfied that the plot revolved around the Lin family, particularly the romantic relationship between Hiromi and Wenqing, as well as the gangsters’ infighting. Their denunciation originated from a monolithic view of the representation of historical events, which June Yip countered when she wrote,

Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films can be seen as attempts to write such a “history from below,” deliberately rejecting the vantage point of the rulers in favor of the perspective of the common people. Milestones of public political history are pushed away from the centers of his films, allowing the everyday experiences of ordinary Taiwanese families to come to the fore . . . the film gives names and voices to . . . the ordinary citizens whose personal stories together make up Taiwanese “popular memory.”<sup>65</sup>

In addition to the salient characteristic of focusing on the people in Hou’s films, we also can interrogate the ways in which Hou’s film approaches the 2/28 Incident by once again bringing in Lin Chengsheng’s *March of Happiness*. Lin’s film devotes even less filmic space to politics, except for the ruses to which the theater group resorts in order to circumvent the colonial and Nationalist governments’ control over artistic freedom. Moreover, whereas in Hou’s *Sadness* Wenqing and Hiroe are left-leaning intellectuals, Lin’s characters do not

engage in any overtly antigovernment activities. *Happiness* ends on the eve of the 2/28 uprising, with only the final intertext informing the audience of the aftermath of the incident. Instead, Lin focuses on several characters to explore the individual's fate at such a tumultuous moment. Like Hiromi and Wenqing, Ayu and Ajin suffer because of the incident, no matter whether one is a leftist like Wenqing or a less political musician like Ajin. In short, tragedy played out in a domestic, private setting can be as powerful as a grand epic of national history.

Understandably, the sense of tragedy largely emanates from the last scenes, in which Ayu waits for the man who will never be able to carry out his promise of a happy life together. We can certainly read this scene allegorically by comparing Ayu's dashed hopes with the Taiwanese people's unrealized anticipation of peace and prosperity when Chen Yi took over. The scene of unbearable sadness is conveyed by the notion of pathos, which, "unlike pity, is a cognitive as well as affective construct. The audience is involved on a character's behalf and yet can exercise pity only reading and evaluating signs inaccessible to the *dramatis personae*."<sup>66</sup> That is, the audience is privy to the information that Ajin has been killed and therefore is able to evaluate the situation: "Such archetypal melodramatic situations activate very strongly an audience's participation, for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency, to impart the different awareness."<sup>67</sup> It is precisely through this participation from the audience that the tragedy and its absurdity are realized on screen.

The three main characters—Ayu, Ajin, and Xie Renchang—deserve further examination. Ayu is a young, headstrong Taiwanese woman who enjoys singing and acting. Ajin, a talented musician and intellectual, studied in Tokyo, where he fell in love with a Japanese girl, and later traveled with her and her father to Shanghai, where the father and daughter worked as spies for the Japanese. Renchang is perhaps the most intriguing character of the trio. His father is a doctor, an amiable, polite, and refined man. Dr. Xie does not flinch or express displeasure when Ayu shows up for the matchmaking meeting with makeup on for the play that makes her face look as if she were wearing a Japanese flag on each cheek. Renchang, however, comes across as a simpleton. When we first see him, he is sitting in the audience with an enchanted look, watching Ayu on stage. The same scene is repeated one more time when she is rehearsing for the new play after the end

of the war. Although everyone is aware of the romantic relationship between Ayu and Ajin, Renschang does not complain except to plead with her to continue walking with him, when all she wants is for him to leave so she can read a letter from Ajin. It is much later that he realizes that Ayu and Ajin are involved in a romantic relationship, but he takes no action. Instead, he relies on the paternal power of Ayu's father to secure a marriage agreement.

If we viewed their backgrounds metaphorically, Renschang would represent the local, the Taiwanese whom Ayu, another Taiwanese, is supposed to marry. Ajin is a product of colonial legacy (Taiwanese and Japanese), further complicated by his experience on the mainland. On the narrative level, Ayu's feelings for him are the driving force behind the plot development and an indispensable feature of domestic melodrama. On a symbolic level, Ajin represents for her the exotic, a longing for the hybridity of Taiwanese cultural heritage, which encompasses Taiwan, Japan, and mainland China.<sup>68</sup> His death signals the impossibility of multiculturalism, which is viewed by some as a subplot of *Sadness*.<sup>69</sup> As Ayu sits by the pier waiting, "the future, no matter whether it is good or bad, will continue to come," but it will no longer be a future of a happy union. Her facing the darkness parallels the symbolic darkness that shrouded the Taiwanese psyche for the next four decades.



It would be pedantic and pointless to say that Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* and Lin Cheng-sheng's *March of Happiness* are two completely different films, and yet focusing on their differences can be fruitful in approaching cinematic renditions of the 2/28 Incident. In addition to the obvious differences in terms of story line and mode of representation, most striking is what the two films strive to accomplish. As the discussion in the first half of this chapter shows, the controversy surrounding Hou's *Sadness* proves the notion that "documentary historical knowledge is impossible," a point that the film tries to convey: "Film as a medium is poorly suited to the transmission of factual information if it is to remain true to its own aesthetic imperatives. Yet this kind of pedantic criticism—making factual accuracy (or inaccuracy) the chief criterion for judging the merits of a historical

film—has been around a long time.”<sup>70</sup> Hou is less interested in a realistic, faithful re-creation of a traumatic event that has had an everlasting impact on Taiwan than in exploring how historical events can be re-created on the screen. In short, as mentioned earlier, *A City of Sadness* is less a historical film than a historiographical work.

Lin Cheng-sheng’s *March of Happiness*, with its strong melodramatic characteristics, is not, strictly speaking, a historical film. Even though the story takes place at the historical site of Tianma Café with the iconic cigarette vendor, *Happiness* imparts interpretive knowledge rather than historical information. In this regard, Lin’s film, like Hou’s, is less concerned with transmitting accurate historical facts; instead, *Happiness* provides an interpretation of how and why the incident happened, by means of melodrama and a subjunctive mood of *mise-en-scène*. In particular, the scenes of violence attempt to analyze the cause of the incident. With the shooting death of the Japanese colonial officer, we are given a connection between the overabundance of firearms and the subsequent accidental killing of a bystander. When Ajin emerges from the upstairs of the theater and the edgy mainland officer fires at him wildly, the audience can conclude how senseless and yet repercussive his death is, like the shooting death of Chen Wenxi, the bystander shot on February 27, 1947. The consequences of Chen’s death could have been contained, and the incident would not have happened. But the reality is that what should have been done was not, and what should not have happened did happen. Taiwan, like Ayu at the dark pier, was to be deprived of happiness for decades but, as the English title implies, must keep marching toward the future.

Ten years after the appearance of the controversial *A City of Sadness*, Lin Cheng-sheng made his *March of Happiness*, when there were both more records and more artistic freedom. His film can be seen as an answer to Hou’s film and the criticism leveled against the director. It is crucial that we notice how Lin also skirts a direct portrayal of violence and opts for a melodramatic mode. Atrocious incidents, these two films seem to suggest, can never be effectively re-created on screen, and alternative modes need to be explored.