

The Revival of the Legendary Taiwanese Film *Ghost Carnival* (1994)

Dancing Its Way Out of the Film Archive :
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The sky is grey blue, the sea as well. Waves crash against the rocks, rolling onto the beach. This legendary Taiwanese film – *Ghost Carnival* (1994) 鬼的狂歡 / 鬼的狂歡 starts with a melancholy tone, almost in contrast to its title. It is considered legendary because it's the only film made by QIU Miao-jin, one of Taiwan's most renowned lesbian writers and innovative literary modernists, who died painfully young at the age of 26. In her novel, Qiu expressed her love for the filmmakers Theo Angelopoulos and Andrei Tarkovsky. She made the film *Ghost Carnival* just a year before committing suicide in Paris in 1995. After Qiu's death, her only film work seemed to sink into the deep dark ocean, disappearing into cold silence until the exhibition *No Master Territories – Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image* awakened it once again. *Ghost Carnival* finally had its international premiere at the House of World Cultures (HKW) in Berlin last summer.

Ghost Carnival is based on Qiu's short story of the same name. Filmed in Taipei in the 1990s, it is believed to have been made as part of the inaugural "Video Communication Arts Talent Workshop Film Creativity Class" (第一屆影像傳播藝術人才研習會影像創意班). The film tells the story of a young woman who commits suicide after experiencing sibling rape; she lingers around, haunting her brother's memory in the days approaching his twentieth birthday.

What interested me about the film was not just that it was directed by Qiu Miaojin, whose life and literary legacy are both legendary, but also the mystery that surrounds it. Before its premiere in Berlin, very few people had actually seen the film, even though it was by no means unknown in Taiwan. At least among Sinophone literature circles and the queer community, anyone who has heard of Qiu Miaojin probably knows that she had made this film. *Ghost Carnival* has circulated around a whole generation of Taiwanese art enthusiasts like a legend, but the film only comes with a brief synopsis, without any other commentary or discussion.

Maybe *Ghost Carnival* is just like its name — a parade of ghosts at night; even if they are partying, there is no trace. It was not until the HKW screened the film that it was brought to light.

Although *Ghost Carnival* is fugitive and mysterious, it still presents two things we may observe more closely. One relates to Taiwan's film industry scene in the 1990s, when the Taiwanese New Wave was gradually fading away. Qiu, as an amateur, participated in a filmmaking workshop and in the film's credits we see the well-known Taiwanese director Chen Kun-hou listed as her supervisor. Since it is a student work, it didn't receive a theatrical release or any public screenings following its completion.

The other aspect of the film's history that I will explore further in this article is that since Qiu's death in 1995 the film has been kept in the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute (TFAI) in Taipei. This means that the 16mm copy of *Ghost Carnival* never disappeared. In fact, it had been lying in the TFAI archives all these years. Why is that? Why has it taken nearly 30 years for this work to be shared with the public for the first time? It seems so close but also so far away as, up until now, Taiwanese audiences have never had a chance to see it in the movie theatre.

This story begins in the spring of 2021. Ms. Tsai, the international copyright contact at TFAI, received an email from the HKW inquiring about the possibility of screening Qiu Miaojin's film *Ghost Carnival* in Berlin. Ms. Tsai followed TFAI's internal procedures accordingly, and the collection management team successfully located the copies from the film archive: a total of two film copies and one original 16mm negative print. After an initial assessment of the condition of the copies, it was discovered that one of them, possibly a working copy for film editing, was in such bad condition that the film could barely be viewed. The other was a viewing copy but, due to suboptimal preservation, the colours had faded away; all that remained was magenta. However, the original 16mm negative film had been kept in good condition due to a better storage and temperature environment, and as a result, it could still be viewed and scanned.

While the film archive staff were working on repairing the film, Ms. Tsai also started clarifying the film's copyright status for digital scanning, restoration and screening authorisation. This is a very crucial step for an old film to be shown to wider audiences nowadays, because the TFAI is only a custodian that preserves these cultural assets on behalf of the filmmakers. The objects included in the film archive may have different rights and conditions. Most of the films' copyrights still belong to different rights holders. Although *Ghost Carnival* has collection records in the database, its copyright status was not clarified after the death of its creator, Qiu Miaojin. In contrast, the copyright status of her literary works is relatively clear and they have been translated into various languages in recent years.

Ms. Tsai recalls her "archaeological work" to obtain film copyright clearance for *Ghost Carnival*. She first asked Lin-Hsu Wen-er, the co-screenwriter of *Ghost Carnival*, whether he held the copyright. However, without any signed contract when working with Qiu, he could not confirm ownership. Therefore, Ms. Tsai turned to Grayhawk Agency, a copyright agency in charge of Qiu's literary works internationally, who then contacted Qiu's family and finally obtained authorisation.

During this process, Ms. Tsai discovered that in the past few years, some organisations and film festivals had already made inquiries to Grayhawk Agency about the film *Ghost Carnival*, but they only had a digital file with very poor-quality images that

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In this particular case, *Ghost Carnival* was able to make its reappearance thanks to the right combination of timing and people. Not only did the HKW contact TFAI directly and ascertain that the original film print was preserved in the film archive in a good condition, Ms. Tsai also actively clarified the film's copyright status. And more importantly, after the copyright was verified, Ms. Tsai also pushed to have the film placed in the annual digitisation list so that a digital file for screening in film theatres could be created. This is another story.

Initially established as a film library in 1979, TFAI is one of the most prominent institutions dedicated to Taiwanese and Sinophone cinema. After several institutional transformations, it is now the only administrative public body in Taiwan dedicated to the preservation and representation of film and audiovisual heritage. TFAI is one of the members of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). It currently has a collection of 6,243 Chinese-language feature films and 12,584 Chinese-language non-fiction films, including many important works of Taiwan New Cinema, as well as a large number of cinema devices, props and paper archives including film posters, still photographs and other important objects of cultural significance.

Like many other film archives, TFAI also faces insufficient space and limited resources in terms of film preservation. If the future of cinema continues to be dominated by digital technology, how can these film archives continue to function as custodians, pioneers and guides of the world of cinema and the art of the moving image, instead of becoming places where films are just left in a dark and low temperature storage room with no chance to be seen by people? This is a very serious challenge for film archives in our time.

Given TFAI's current resources and budget, the number of films that can be digitised and restored each year is limited, and not every film proposed can be included in the annual digital scanning or even restoration list. The film archive must comprehensively evaluate a variety of factors to determine which films can be prioritised. But this brings up the question of how these factors are considered in the first place. Are the selected films prioritised based on their local significance or their potential for international outreach? Or are they selected based on specific topics or historical importance in Taiwanese cinema? And who gets to determine these sets of standards?

Take the film digital restoration list of TFAI as an example. From 2015 to 2019, 31 films were digitally restored, most of which were the Taiwanese-language films (Tai-yu-pian) that TFAI is currently focusing on, such as the works of directors Lin Tuan-chiu and Hsin Chi; as well as the works of internationally renowned Taiwanese filmmakers such as King Hu and Hou Hsiao-hsien. The selection of the digital restorations somehow reflects the historical and political narratives in Taiwan nowadays, which is to cling to the Taiwanese local identities rather than to the dominating Chinese ideology that had once forbid Taiwanese language cinema. It also shows how cinema can act as a relatively effective tool with regards to cultural diplomacy. As Prof. Lim Song Hwee argues in his book *Taiwan Cinema as Soft Power: Authorship, Transnationality, Historiography*, Taiwan is a nation without strong political or economic power. Therefore, cinema becomes a form of soft power to not only rebuild Taiwanese identities but to also attract global attention and allies.

It is worth noting that amongst this digital restoration list (2015 – 2019), only one film directed by a female filmmaker had been digitally restored and this was due to the program *Reel Taiwan: Selected Films from Fragrant Formosa*, organised by the Taiwan International Documentary Festival (TIDF). The film *A Day at the Central Market* / 中央市場的一天 by WANG Ying was shot on 16mm film. It was part of a TV documentary series made by Taiwan's state-owned China Television Company (CTV) in the 1970s to 80s. It is regarded as one of the key Taiwanese 'local documentaries' for its historical and cultural value. The filmmaker Wang Ying recalled that the budget of production was very limited. She only had 12 days to make this film and operated the camera herself. *A Day at the Central Market* depicts the local traditional market exactly as it was, but the episode was likely banned from the broadcast channel due to its perceived display of the unhygienic conditions. The work had its world premiere at TIDF in 2020, screening from the digitised version.

That Wang Ying's work is the only female directed title in the digital restoration list from 2015 to 2019 shows the gender imbalance in the film industry in the past, when very few filmmakers were female. Furthermore, the list also shows the lack of gender consideration in the film archiving / digital restoring process.

In 2020, we were finally able to hear more voices that have been silenced for too long. TFAI restored three titles by Mi-mi Lee, one of the most prominent Taiwanese female filmmakers from the 1970s to 1990s. She was the youngest female director in TTV at that time. These three features, *Unmarried Mothers* (1980) / 未婚媽媽, *Evening News* (1981) / 晚間新聞, and *Girls' School* (1982) / 女子學校 were directed and produced independently by Lee in the early 1980s. They had their world premiere at Women Make Waves Film Festival Taiwan in 2021. Lee's works touched upon women's struggles in a patriarchal society. Depicting an atypical female character for that time, they showed the possibility for women to be independent and to refute the status quo.

The aforementioned examples and the peculiar incident of the revival of *Ghost Carnival* make us wonder and rethink what operating mechanism may be implicit in a film archive. The film history we have is constructed by film archives, which expose their ideology through their collections. When a film archive decides to put a film in its collection, it does not mean that the history of the film and the people who made it will be given equal attention. A film archive is not a neutral institute that is always a righteous guardian for the film heritage of our times. It is ambiguous and capricious. It might change its mindset overnight. And it is not really as open as it may consider itself, sometimes you never see a film again once it has been sent into a film archive.

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will also represent the ideology that is hidden in a film archive.

Why did it take so long for the films made by female filmmakers to be shown on the big screen? The re-discovery of the films made by Wang Ying, Mi-mi Lee, and Qiu Miao-jin remind us of the missing perspectives of Taiwanese film history.

How can we create a future for cinema that offers more space to discuss film histories from feminist, queer, and alternative perspectives, instead of a film history with a “capital H” that belongs to a system operated under nationalistic, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies? *Ghost Carnival* crawled out of the freezing cold and darkness of the film archive storage room to appear in front of the world, revealing the limitations as well as the potentials of a film archive.

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