On October 7, 2003, Tsai Ming-liang screened his film *What Time Is It There?* at the Harvard Film Archive in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as part of his tour of colleges on the east and west coasts of the United States. We interviewed him before and after the screening. Wang translated the interview.

**Chris Fujiwara:** Are you conscious of a difference in the reception your work has received in the West vs. in Asia? Do Western and Asian viewers respond to different aspects of the films, read them differently?

**Tsai Ming-liang:** Most of the foreign viewers that I have come to have contact with are film professionals or aficionados. I also have the opportunity to face audiences in Taiwan. My feeling is that there is not that much of a difference in their reading of my films. It is a matter of getting used to my films. Those who accept my films right away are normally those who have
more tolerance for different films. Just like how we watch foreign films or how we are able to accept Bergman films. I don’t think it is a matter of understanding, but of habit. It takes time for my audience to go from not accepting to liking my films. Some people accept them right away, but others need more time. Of course once they know my films, they would know not to expect to see action or a story in my films. They would know that there would be Lee Kang-sheng, or that there would be no music or very little dialogue. In *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, my latest film, for example, there are only ten lines of dialogue in the film. Because in the past my earlier films such as *The River* or *Vive L’Amour* were screened at film festivals, most viewers tended to be restless when they went to my films because they were seeing a lot of films at film festivals. Some would leave after only seeing part of the film. Today fewer and fewer people leave during the screening. They know that they cannot be restless if they want to see my films. Almost no one left the screenings of *Goodbye Dragon Inn* in Venice, Toronto, Vancouver, and Taipei. I think it is a matter of getting used to my films.

**Shujen Wang:** How about issues of space? Do people have different readings of your films in terms of space?

**TM:** I think my films are more urban, about urban living and style. It would be hard for a non-urban dweller to have the right kind of reading of my films. For example, professor Lu Fei-I is editing a book on my films and he has collected reviews of my films from around the world. He found something very interesting. A reviewer’s geographical location would determine their readings of my films. Reviews from one location, for example, would focus on the body, while reviews from another location would be on space, and yet another on time. I think this has to do with the nature of my films, in that they are very open. As such, they are open to multiple readings. Even if narrative films normally have a story, I try hard to remove the story from my film. While it is impossible to take the story completely away from a narrative film, I try to decrease it as much as possible as I do not want viewers to focus on the story. I want the viewers to feel. That is the difference.

**SW:** When you make a film, do you have a certain kind of audience in mind that you are making the films for?
TM: No, not at all. In fact, I always believe that in creating a film there should not be an audience. Markets have audiences, but not art creation. Hollywood films of course have markets and audiences, and they need to please the mass audience. A genre film would also have its audience. My films, on the contrary, are work created from my life experience. There is no target audience. My films are more like a dialogue I have with myself, or with my environment. Basically I do not think about my audience when I make films. And of course every time I say something like this, it creates misunderstanding, as people would say, “Ah, you don’t care about your audience.” That is not what I mean. It is just that creation and audience are two different things. Of course once you are in a market, you have to think about your audience. What is more sellable or marketable in dealing with sex, for example?

I think my films are traditional. Many people say that my films are avant-garde, but in spirit I think they are classic. This is not an issue of not understanding my films. The difference is that there are different readings of my films. But in general I am very traditional. My concepts in theatre, or the films I watch, are all very traditional. So I am very traditional in how I treat my films. It is the style or the approach to certain topics that I hope is new so that I can surprise my audience. I think of my viewers as my equal. Very intelligent. You know what I mean? I never feel that my audience would not understand a situation and that I would have to dumb it down for them. No. I feel that my audience would use their own life experience to understand my films. And it does not matter if their understanding or reading of my films is correct. Of course I can’t expect my audience to have the same reaction I do to a certain situation or a scene, a scene such as Yang Kuei-Mei’s crying at the end of *Vive L’Amour*. I do not expect that. I even hope that my audience would be very detached when they watch my films.

SW: To me, the most poignant moments in your films are the two scenes in *The River* and *What Time Is It There?* when you show the mother’s sexual longing and frustration and loneliness. My heart aches when I watch those two scenes. It is very rare to see such a deep and poignant depiction of middle-aged women’s sexuality or loneliness in any film.
TM: I always feel a lot of guilt toward my mother. I feel that I have neglected her. Just like how women are neglected in most patriarchal societies. Of course such a neglect is probably not intentional. But in a way it is natural. You just do. I think my reading or understanding of women has a root in my childhood. My grandmothers, my mother, my sister, and my aunt are all very strong women. Their strength is their resilience toward life in general, in how they accept their fate or deal with hardship in life. Like my paternal grandmother, for example. She was a village woman who worked in the field. She was very traditional. All her life she wore very plain cotton clothes. Very traditional. When she walked on the street she looked like she just walked out of an old movie. And my maternal grandmother ran a casino. I grew up in the casino. I spent several years of my childhood in a casino. And my aunt was a call girl. She told me she worked at the club as a cashier, but I don’t believe her. [Laughs.] I think she also had sex with clients. But they did it for survival. When my grandma was running the casino, I witnessed her fighting with local bullies. She was fearless. She’s very petite but fearless. That’s why I like these strong women, that even if all the men in the world had died they would be okay. And that is how I deal with women in my films. I am very different when it comes to men in my films. Because of the subservient position most women occupy or are assigned to in their cultures, they have to be strong. And subconsciously they have to be stronger than men. In Vive L’Amour for instance you see a very active and strong heroine, both in how she pursues her career and in how she expresses her sexuality. She is stronger than the men in the film. But it also makes her lonely. That is the price she has to pay. You know, there are always trade-offs. When you have sex, maybe you won’t have love. Once you gain something you would also lose another. That is how I deal with gender issues. I try to be neutral.

Human beings are very complex. Men also have feminine qualities or tendencies, only repressed. They are only allowed to show the masculine side. That’s why I feel that human beings are hypocritical. There are too many limits and systems that make us hypocrites. Only when we are alone can we relax and really be ourselves. So in my films I always show a lot of respect to women. And, sexually, women are so much stronger than men in my films.
SW: The two masturbation scenes are very moving and powerful.

TM: It is something very private, that you do behind closed doors. Naturally I don't know how women masturbate. [Laughs.] It was just my imagination. And part of it was the actress's own acting.

SW: She is very good and very convincing.

TM: Yes, Lu Yi-Ching, we have worked together for a long time. What is fun about my films, to me, is the fact that these two films are two separate films, but you can see them as one film. These are two things, but you can see them as one. Human beings are very complex. Our behaviors and thoughts are sometimes out of our control. Sometimes there are situations we do not know how to handle. The family we see in The River is one that really should not exist. The father is gay, but he has a family. A wife. A child. But we understand why he has a family. He has to have a family to be his front. So in a way he denies himself his own life to be a deceptive man, a deceptive father, a deceptive husband. His family is destined for unhappiness. So this woman is really unlucky. Everyone in this family has his or her own issues and problems. But I also think that even if the father weren't gay, the relationships would also change.

Living together is not easy. Conflicts emerge. And how do these changes and conflicts happen? My feeling is that it is because we don't know how to adjust the distance or space between two people. You know what I mean? When two people marry, they lose their own space. They don't even have their own lives. So I often question if such a relationship is healthy. And I often deal with these situations and relations in my film. On the surface it is a family, a wife, husband, son, mother, father. But in their attitudes I make them go back to the very beginning, to zero. So they are just three bodies. It is only when they return to the beginning, to zero, that they can begin to reexamine their relations and adjust them. For example, the father and son have to resort to an incestual relationship for them to understand the issues. Of course it took place in the dark and they did not know who the other person was. But it was precisely because they were anonymous that the intimacy could take place. That was the thing they needed the most, an embrace, and comfort. But such intimacy is not possible when they
know each other’s identity. For Chinese, or at least people of my generation, children really want to hug their fathers, but they do not dare to simply because their fathers never hug them. Thus people miss many opportunities to express their feelings toward each other. They are missing the “yuan” that exists between father and son. I think that is a pity. That is why I try to examine this issue in my films. Is it better to be in a father-son relationship, or is it better to be with a total stranger? Because we are all very lonely.

SW: You were born in Malaysia and studied and work in Taiwan; to you where is home? I know many people have asked you this question, but my own reading is that the alienation expressed in your films probably has something to do with the fact that you are also diasporic?

TM: The way I answer this question is that I would say that I am a Taiwanese director from Malaysia. [Laughs.] This is also a question of identity. I feel that human beings always like to find trouble for themselves. They always give themselves and others a lot of limits and boundaries. I don’t really care about my identities. But others do, on my behalf. But do they really care? Not really. They only pay lip service. Just like the fact that I am still single, and there was this older relative of mine who always asked me why I was still not married. One day I finally asked him if my getting married would make him a happier person. Then he didn’t know what to say as he never thought about it. So this is a subconscious question: if you are not married, you must be very miserable. But I am not. So this kind of question is nonexistent for me.

But there is one thing that I find very interesting. I never have any sense of belonging. I have lived in Taiwan for over twenty years. Sometimes I still feel that it is a strange place to me. But when I leave Taiwan I miss it very much. I miss the food there. But when I am in Taiwan, very often I would find myself trapped inside of my house. As if there is no relation between the society and me. So I feel that it is very often that humans lack a sense of belonging. It is really rhetorical when we say that falling leaves return to their root. You know my father went to Malaysia from China when he was twelve. Because they were poor, his father took the family in a small and damaged boat and stopped wherever there was a pier. But his education and his environment all made him think of China as his homeland. Then later
I realized he really wasn’t thinking about the place so much as about one particular relative or family as his homeland. For example, he had an aunt who was very nice to him, so he always thought of her. He lived in Malaysia from age twelve to fifty-five. China finally opened up when he was fifty-five and he returned to China, only to go back to Malaysia later. Maybe that was why he was okay with my decision. He felt that wherever I chose to live was fine with him. He didn’t want us to take him into consideration when we were choosing a place to live. So later I felt that I was a global person. I would be okay wherever I go. But then again I never have a sense of belonging wherever I go. That is why I have never bought any real estate property in Taiwan. I always rent. But I still accumulate stuff. You know when I first rented, I did not have any furniture. But now every time I move, I manage to have a lot of stuff and furniture. And then I would have an epiphany: why do I have so much stuff? I am just one person. I am about sixty kilograms, but I have about one thousand kilograms worth of stuff. But living in Taiwan makes me happy. I like living in Taiwan. It offers me free space to create.

SW: Talking about space and identities: I am wondering about your decision in including Paris in What Time Is It There? It marks the film as different from your other films, which have always been about Taipei. Does the decision have anything to do with the fact that the film was a French production?

TM: It was a very natural decision, as my films reflect my living situation. I always made my films in Taiwan. Because of the opportunities to participate in international film festivals, I began to travel a lot. But my feeling of this kind of traveling was that I was simply moving from one hotel to the next, from one room to another, and not really from one country to another country. Of course it was very exciting in the beginning, but toward the end, all I could feel was that I was drifting and unrooted. So ten years later when I wanted to make a film about death, all I could think of was this feeling of drifting, and death to me became a sense of belonging and of resting. To a layman’s point of view, death is a destination, maybe a stopover in our lives, or perhaps a final destination, I don’t know. But the whole process is one of drifting. So I was thinking about my experience in the past ten years, of
drifting around, of traveling. The reason why I chose Paris was because I am more familiar with Paris. I am more familiar with the streets in Paris as I travel to Paris most frequently. In fact I lived in Paris for a month. I didn’t go to the museums that month and all I did was roam the streets. And then I realized that it was the same no matter where I traveled. No matter where I go, I try to find the things that I am familiar with. And no matter where I go, I do not have a sense of belonging. And no matter where I go, I always have ice cream and look around in the beginning, and then I stop eating it because once I am over this “tourist” mindset I always go back to my own status of being. So it is all the same wherever I go. Because I felt this way, naturally I wanted to include this sense of drifting in my film, and naturally I picked Paris. But when I finished the film, the producer told me that I had turned Paris into a ghost town in *What Time Is It There?* I think the producer was happy about it, too, because most other people would include the Eiffel Tower as the landmark. But mine was different.

**CF:** What is the importance of the Jean-Pierre Léaud scene in *What Time Is It There?*

**TM:** The reason I included *The 400 Blows* in my film had to do with the fact that I included Paris in the film. It was linked to the story of *What Time Is It There?* It was through the film that Hsiao-kang got to know Paris of the fifties. What I found interesting was that my own knowledge of Paris was also through film, rather than experience. Even if I had been to Paris, my Paris would still exist through Truffaut’s films. My desire to want to go to Paris was also through Truffaut. So naturally I included *The 400 Blows*. And I was thinking about the protagonist in *The 400 Blows*. Whatever happened to him? That was why I wanted to have Jean-Pierre Léaud in my film. It was all very natural. Working with him of course was not easy. He felt that he had to have some lines in the film and that he had to act. But my reason for wanting him in my film was just to let people know that he is still here. Only that he’s older. So there is a purpose. He was waiting for his lines for a month. I didn’t give them to him. Then he got very upset and showed me the lines that he had written for himself. And he said, “Do you see the lines that I have written?” I said, “Sure. Go ahead and use them.” But when
it was time to shoot his scene, I told him that all I wanted him to do was to sit at the bench quietly. And he agreed. That’s it.

SW: He didn’t insist on using his own lines?

TM: No. Actually he understood that he needed to respect the director. And he’s a very experienced actor. So I felt that having him sit there was enough, for my purpose. When the film screened in France, the audience always clapped whenever he appeared on the screen. It was very moving. So there was really no need for him to act. Plus my films are not films that need a lot of acting. It is all coincidental. He was there and available, so I asked him.

SW: Since it involves foreign location and foreign funding and distribution, do you think of the film as a transnational production?

TM: It is now trendy to talk about transnational coproduction. Because it has gotten increasingly difficult to produce and distribute art films internationally, transnational coproduction has become necessary. Of course it comes with risks, but it makes international distribution easier. But that is really not how I work. When I made *What Time Is It There?*, I was thinking that I was making my own film. Conceptually European producers and investors work differently than their American counterparts. When they ask me to make a film, they are not asking me to make a film to their liking. Rather, they want me to make my own film to show them. But when American producers ask Asian directors to make a film, they always ask them to make the film that they want, a market-oriented film. That was why I decided to work with European producers. They give me more creative freedom and space. My next film will also be funded by the French. Further, my films are not geographically based. You can say that they are both very personal and international.

And I am not quite sure what you meant by “transnationalization.” Is it a film that features stars from different countries? Or is it a film that tells a story that everyone can understand? This kind of transnationalization is meaningless to me. In this sense, American films are very transnational, and there are plenty of these films. There is no need for me to make another film like that. You know what I mean? I think it is important to make the films
that I want to make. My films are not really Taiwanized or Taipei-ized either. People always think that I make films about Taipei. They always say that because I make films about Taipei that I really understand Taipei. Or that I make films about the youth that I must understand the youth. I think this is a misconception. I am only making films that I am familiar with. I am sure if I lived in Malaysia for a few years, the films I made would be about Malaysia. So it is in fact personal. And personal films by definition would be inward looking.

**SW:** I know that you have not given up on the Taiwanese audience even though the local film industry and market are nonexistent. *Yi-Yi*, for example, was never released in Taiwan. You worked very, very hard last year promoting *What Time Is It There?* in Taiwan; you and the cast were all over Taiwan trying to sell tickets. That you have not given up the Taiwanese audience was very moving to me.

**TM:** I feel that Taiwan is really an untapped market! And how can we even talk about “giving up” the market? I am not familiar with the *Yi-Yi* situation, because that was Director Yang’s decision. I can’t speak for him. But I feel that no one is willing to give up a market, or give up the opportunity to have contact with his or her audience. But there are external and objective factors that are out of our control. The exhibition sector is one such example. There are cases when the theaters are not interested in your films. My own feeling is that Taipei, or other major cities in central and southern Taiwan, is like any other big city in the world. In these major urban settings, there are always those viewers who would like to see your films. The Golden Horse International Film Festival, for example, has been in existence for over ten years, cultivating a large audience. This is not a new audience. And I am one of them. So of course there are audiences. Just like in the States, a Broadway show like *Cats* is very popular. And there are other classical plays that sell very well. How come there is a lack of good films? It is not because there is no audience for good films. The problem lies in the fact that there are no distribution outlets. There are no theaters interested in showing these films. There are no young distributors who are interested in distributing good films. That is why there has been a long-term vacuum. Every time a good film comes along, the distributor or exhibitor’s attitude has always
been: “Let’s give it a try.” But you can’t just give it a try. One would have to seriously promote the film and identify your audience. And you’ll also have to have a theater that is willing to work with you, to give you more screening days. Not just one day to give it a try. This is not an experiment. That’s what happened in Taiwan. There is a misconception that there is no audience in Taiwan and that people have given up on Taiwan. I always disagree. There has always been an audience in Taiwan. The only thing lacking is that we didn’t cultivate them. The reason I didn’t work on promoting my earlier films was that I didn’t own those films. Central Film owns the films. So they are in charge of distribution and exhibition. So when *What Time Is It There?* was showing in Taiwan, I bought the rights back from the French company and I distributed the film in Taipei myself. They were very nice about it; they sold the rights to me at a very low price. They did that also because they didn’t know the Asian market that well.

**SW:** So the French were the sole funders of the film? And they own all rights? Including overseas distribution rights?

**TM:** Yes.

**SW:** I just wrote a book on distribution, and I interviewed quite a few distributors in Taiwan. They told me the reason the Taiwanese film industry was suffering was that Taiwanese directors do not tell stories. . . .

**TM:** That’s nonsense!

**SW:** They insisted that the source of the problem is at the Government Information Office’s Film Guidance Fund.

**TM:** That’s all nonsense. Of course I can’t say that that’s all nonsense, because they are speaking from their perspective. But I know many hold the same view. They always feel that it is Taiwanese directors’ fault that Taiwanese films do not tell stories. But let me tell you, if there were directors in the United States who do not tell stories in their films, no one would blame them. Why? Because there is an outlet for this kind of film: the art house. But this is not the case in Taiwan. There are only a handful of directors who are still making films. That’s why these few directors have to bear all the responsibility for the box-office performance of their films. And these distributors
or exhibitors never invest anything in Taiwanese films, but they blame the directors for the demise of the Taiwanese film industry. The fact is also that the major Hollywood distributors in Taiwan control all theaters there. For example, when *What Time Is It There?* was released in Taipei and was doing well at the box office, I asked the theater to show it for another week. The theater owner told me, “Director Tsai, we really would like to show your film as it is doing quite well, but the American major distributors tell me that if I continue showing your film, they won’t give me *Spiderman.*”

No one understands the true reason for the decline of the local film industry. I always ask this question. Before Hou Hsiao-hsien, there were films featuring Brigitte Lin. Does anyone remember when Lin left Taiwan? She went to Hong Kong to make action films because nobody wanted to see those commercial films made in Taiwan. And those were commercial films, mind you. And those producers were making films until there was no more market. So who really was responsible for the shrinking of the Taiwanese market? They didn’t catch up with the audience. So after Brigitte Lin left, where did the production money go? It left with Lin. Of course they had to make money. It is simple. And you can’t blame them. But they can’t turn around and blame the directors for not telling stories and causing the decline of the film industry. Why should directors tell stories? Even the new Taiwanese directors hold the same view as the distributors and exhibitors. To me that is very immature. So go ahead and tell stories. No one is stopping you from telling stories. Tsai Ming-liang doesn’t tell a story in his films, but you can tell stories. And you can save the Taiwanese market. You know what I mean? No one is stopping anyone from doing anything. That’s why I don’t like the view from some of the new directors that blame us for not telling stories in our films. I am always bemused as to whom I have offended by not telling stories. But I have been making films and I have made films for ten years and I have made more films than they have. More than those who tell stories. So go ahead, tell your stories. No one is stopping you. But your telling stories in your films should not be something that you use to critique me.

When I make films that do not tell stories, I don’t make them as an opposition to Hollywood or to these young directors. I do it because I like it. And I know my market. There shouldn’t be any conflicts. But people always confuse these two issues. That’s why there are so many views like this. It is
because they don't know what they are talking about. And because they
don’t know, they misunderstand. And there is no clarification of this misun-
derstanding, and the misunderstanding deepens. Last year I visited college
campuses in Taiwan, and I spoke to fifty thousand, to sixty thousand, stu-
dents. And I always asked them this question: when did Brigitte Lin leave
Taiwan? And it would dawn on them that they had mixed up the time and
the issue, and that they had mistakenly blamed the few directors for the
decline of the local film industry. I always tell people there is no need to talk
about box office. If my films didn’t sell, I would not exist, right? Why am I
still here? Yes, my films don’t sell in Taiwan, but they do elsewhere. So I am
still here. Why is it? Because my films are commodities too. Why blame the
director? If they make something that does not sell here, but sells elsewhere,
you cannot blame them. Just because you don’t read Red Chamber’s Dream
doesn’t mean that it is not good. You see what I mean? That’s why there are
so many such misleading opinions.

There is a bigger crisis in Taiwan now. Most people’s sense of value is
that of the American value system, that box office reigns supreme. This is
so from the government down. Sorry, I have to criticize the government
again. [Laughs.] I have met many very good officials in Taiwan, but it is
very hard to do things if the society at large is a certain way. That’s why one
would have to make films that would have a good box-office performance.
And that’s the Hollywood kind of movies. We don’t have to ask if Taiwan
is able to make those films; there is no environment to create that kind of
movie. But there is a different kind of director who makes different films.
What wrong have they done? None. But this kind of value has always been
belittled. So when people ask me why I make the films I do, I always say
that it’s because I know what my values are.

SW: You mentioned that your next film would still be French invested. How
about Goodbye Dragon Inn? Who produced the film?

TM: Goodbye Dragon Inn is my own film. I worked with Lee Kang-sheng.
This is also an awkward situation. I read this writing by a fan on a Web site
that is very touching. He said he couldn’t fathom that I would have to resort
to using my own money to make this film given that I have been making
films for over ten years and have been successful overseas. It makes me sad
to read this, too. That’s true. Why should I spend my own money to make a film? The truth is there are not that many people who would dare to invest in my films. There are some in France and some in Japan. But even these producers are very cautious, trying to figure out the least risky way to invest in my films. That is why I started my own production company so that I can create an environment that is conducive to my creation. This way I can produce, have a return, and continue to make films. It is very hard. You’ll know when you see Goodbye Dragon Inn. When I finished the film, I thought to myself: “Thank God this is my own production. Otherwise the producer would be finished.” But I also think that it is good that it is my own production, as there is still a market for this film. And there is probably an even better market for Goodbye Dragon Inn, a film that features only a movie theater and a few actors who are moving around in the theater doing nothing in the film.

SW: Is Lee Kang-sheng in the film?

TM: Yes. He plays the projectionist.

SW: So he’s not Hsiao-kang anymore?

TM: That’s not important. [Laughs.] He’s still Hsiao-kang.

CF: You mentioned Truffaut. What other directors have influenced you?

TM: I like older films, those that were made before the seventies. Not all of course, but many of them. I don’t think it is meaningful to name particular directors, but the larger context of the time was more interesting, as those were my adolescent years. And I saw those films after I passed my adolescence. At that time there was no differentiation between commercial and art films. They were all released in theaters. All stages of the production, screenwriting, directing, acting, can all be very creative. Fassbinder, Visconti, Bresson, Godard, Truffaut, many directors in Japan worked that way. There was no such thing as an art film, but now there is. Why? Because back then, it was important that they knew what quality was, and they knew the importance of literature and culture. But now there is a clear break: this is commercial, and that is art. But even art films still need to have a commercial component. It is very sad. When Hollywood makes films,
the sole purpose is to make money. The stars are also money as they are expensive. So these films do not make any contribution to the society. What happens to the humanist qualities? One can always find humanist value in older films and literature. Take Bergman’s *Virgin Spring* for example; I saw it when I was twenty, and again in my twenties, and again in my forties. What moves me the most is that the film really says that human beings are a very precious species. Even when the protagonist is thinking about killing someone who deserves to die, he still asks God for forgiveness. Who would make a film like that today? No one. Today people are striving to make money, to possess material things, to progress.

[The rest of the interview was conducted at various times later in the day.]

**CF:** My favorite scene in *What Time Is It There?* is when Chen Shiang-chyi drops the water bottle. She’s sitting on the bed, and then she drops it and says, “oh.” To me, that is great acting.

**TM:** Yes, she’s very good, especially in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *The Skywalk Is Gone*. She likes working with me. And I like working with her. And I feel that I have been waiting for her to get older and to gain more life experience. But she’s very diligent. She knew that there would be conflicts working with me because she had formal acting training. She learned theater acting at a university in New York. But slowly she’s dropping a lot of her training. For example, in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* she played a crippled woman. And she spent a lot of time with the crippled and studied very hard to walk like them. Everyone who saw her walk would tell her that it looked real. But whenever she showed it to me I would say, “not quite,” because I knew she was acting. And three days into shooting, I decided to reshoot all the scenes because I did not believe that she was crippled. One day I realized what the problem was: that she should keep her mouth closed. When she walked, she kept her mouth open, as if she pitied herself, and I told her, “Your character has been crippled for a long time, so you must treat it as something ordinary. She’s not looking for sympathy.” After that, no matter how she walked she was great. I think that’s the connection between the actor and director. You have to trust your actor, but they also have to earn your trust. When you trust them, you trust them.
[To Wang:] Your earlier question was very good about box-office issues in Taiwan, that the reason why the box office of local films is declining was because the directors do not tell stories. I think it is very sad that directors have to go around and explain themselves. That’s why I think that Ozu was very lucky. Back then there was no distinction between art films and commercial films.

**CF:** Yes, that’s very true. Ozu is a director who really exemplifies that. Because his films, which today would be considered art films, had a large popular audience. Just like John Ford, it was the same thing.

**TM:** Today’s audience has a very low threshold in accepting different films, because Hollywood has brainwashed them in the past ten years.

**CF:** Oh yes, this is globalization.

**TM:** Recently a female British director went to Taiwan and was asked the same question that she thought was absurd: what distinguishes art film from commercial film? She said, “You know, my parents saw all those black-and-white Russian films and they never thought that they were watching art films. It was just film.” That’s why I often tell the audience very straightforwardly that they are not aware of the fact that they have been brainwashed by Hollywood and misled by popular press. Some of them were even proud of themselves when they told me that they didn’t understand my films. When I was in Toronto recently, a reporter from mainland China told me that his colleagues all fell asleep at my films. And I answered that he must also have fallen asleep watching my films. [Laughs.] I was never polite about that because they have this attitude that they didn’t understand my films because I didn’t make films for them. They always have this attitude that I have to make films for them. That’s why it is hard work; you have to go around and explain to these audiences that this is not so.

**CF:** People think that film is a popular art, which is ridiculous.

**TM:** The only time I watch Hollywood movies is on the plane. And I watch them without wearing the headset. I feel it is very sad, and I always write to the airlines to complain and ask if they could show something else.
SW: What is your relationship with international art film sales companies?

TM: International sales companies are the reason why it is hard for art films to exist. The motive of these international sales companies is profit. That’s why they ask independent and art film directors to make films like Hollywood films. Their strategy is to cut the selling/asking price of these films down while telling you that it is hard to sell these films. In my case, I know that there is a market for my films, but these sales companies and exhibitors tell me otherwise, that it is becoming harder and harder to sell my films. It is very disappointing.

SW: How about Fortissimo? They are an important international sales company for art films, especially in Asia. . . .

TM: They are the worst. They are worse than independent distributors in the United States. Fortissimo started their business in art film, but they are looking to make more money in selling art films. Let me tell you a story. You know Master Xingyun? He often tells this story that he buys straw sandals from this person. The asking price for these sandals is $5 but Xingyun pays him $40. So people ask him why he pays so much for the straw sandals. Xingyun answers that it is because there are only a few people making these straw sandals now, and he needs to support this dying trade. And if this sandal maker cannot make a living selling these sandals and quits, where and how would he be able to buy these sandals? That’s why I always feel that art filmmaking is just like making straw sandals. The price for art films is the price of straw sandals, not leather shoes. For example, to make an art film that should sell for $30, the cost is $20. But the sales companies and distributors would normally only pay $2 for the world rights. They know very well that it costs money to make these films in Asia, and they have the heart to cut the price down. This is especially unthinkable given that I have made films for more than ten years with a proven market. Still, they would tell you that it is very difficult these days and your film is worth only $2. It is very disappointing. It is better for Japanese films as there are more distributors or sales companies that represent them. For East and Southeast Asian markets, there is only one company, Fortissimo. So you have no choice, you
have to go to them. They always told me that if they made more money on my films, they would share the profit with me, but that never happens.

**SW:** Does Fortissimo represent you?

**TM:** In the beginning I was never interested in Fortissimo because I understood their method. Later I distributed through them, but not *Goodbye Dragon Inn*.

**CF:** Why don’t you distribute your own film?

**TM:** I do in Taiwan, but for overseas markets you have to do it through a distributor. For example, in Hong Kong there are only one or two people distributing art films. And they would always tell you that it is very difficult distributing art films. And they would ask you to give them your films, and if there were profits, they would share with you. But there was never any director who has made a cent from them. That’s why we always see films at film festivals by a certain director; it means the director is still active. But very soon that director could disappear. I always tell the organizers of these film festivals that they should not organize festivals that benefit only the distributors. There are many problems with these international film festivals. This year I attended a documentary film festival in Marseille in France. They invited me to speak at a panel on the distinction between documentary and narrative films. I asked them why they invited me to speak on this subject. Couldn’t they tell the difference between the two forms? Even though many people feel that my films look like documentaries, they know very well that they are not. I told them that we should not talk about this. Instead, we should be discussing what one should do about these directors. They made these documentaries and they screened their films here at the festival. And then? What would become of them? Where is the money for their next film? I told the organizers of the festival that they should be asking television buyers to come to a festival like this to buy these good documentaries. They should think about the distribution of these films. Compared to other directors I am quite lucky. But I still face these same distribution issues. You know when I go to international film festivals I see the same handful of distributors. But in ten years how many
directors have survived? Very few. It is because these distributors don’t care about art. They only care that there is a new director who becomes famous so that they can sell his/her new film. Who cares about Tsai Ming-liang? And these new directors never know what their rights are. We should really publicize the situation so that people know what the distributors are doing, their methods, function, and how they operate.

**CF:** How is your relationship with your American distributors, like Wellspring for example?

**TM:** I don’t really know about the international distribution of my films because in the past I didn’t produce my own films and the production company owned the rights. And I didn’t have too much say about my overseas rights. But I think that France and the United States are the only two countries that actually have clear records of sales and distribution. Others are worse. . . . My next film will be a porn with some musical numbers.

**SW:** Is Hsiao-kang going to be in the film?

**TM:** Yes. Very interesting.

**SW:** What kind of rating would this film be?

**TM:** Of course I will make an X-rated film.

**CF:** I was thinking about the film *Rebels of the Neon God*, a film that I like very much and people don’t talk about enough. That is closer to modernity in a lot of ways than your other films, don’t you think? Because there is a video arcade, so you confront computer technology and the very alienating, modern environment.

**TM:** I made the film because I saw kids playing in video arcades and I tried to play the games, too. I always asked myself what exactly attracted these kids that they would keep playing. That was why I made this film. And there were many scenes about machines being taken apart. It was the same with the telephone. So it is not just video games or the video arcade. It is technology in general.
CF: Take these machines apart to make them more human, so that we can understand them?

TM: I am not trying to destroy the machines as much as deconstruct them, providing a way to think about technology. This film is almost like a tour of Taipei. In the film we follow Hsiao-kang randomly going through the city. So, for example, we follow him to the telephone center, you know, a dating club. And that was new then in Taipei. And we ask how is it that human beings would have to resort to technology to find a mate. When did we become so lonely that they need to go to a place like that? This is similar to my television drama about this brother and sister. The sister is a cashier at this video arcade and the brother is addicted to playing at the arcade. Their parents are janitors at a hotel. But they also work as ticket scouts whenever there are popular movies showing like *City of Sadness*. They work so hard to keep the family together, not knowing that their kids have drifted away.

CF: Yes, I saw this at the Museum of Fine Arts here in Boston. That was very nice and quite different from your other films in that it has more of a narrative.

TM: Last year I came into contact with these two viewers who were both middle-aged men. They were very interesting. No matter where I went to give public talks I would always see one of them. And they would be listening very attentively with their heads down. Finally, one day one of them said, “Director Tsai, I have been observing you for a long time now, from your early television shows to your current films. Why are you getting further and further away from us? Your early television shows were very moving, but your films make me sleepy. Why don’t you make your films like those television dramas? Why don’t you tell stories that we understand?” I told him that I just couldn’t, as I have to move forward. I can’t stop at the same place. I know that place and know the kind of power it has, but I cannot stay there. Sometimes the artists themselves cannot control where they move. I think I am moving inward. I turn back to look at my past and I feel these days people do not look back, they only look forward. So I purposely slow down my pace.

CF: Yes, it’s what you said about action movies, they are always about the outside. People should understand your films, whether they are about fam-
ily relations or about somebody who is in a different place as in *What Time Is It There?* Things everybody knows about and should be able to respond to. It is paradoxical to me that *The Matrix* has a bigger audience than *What Time Is It There?* because your film is about things that are more important to people.

**TM:** In fact I was quite depressed for a while. It was after I made *The River*. I was almost boycotted by the entire Taiwanese audience. People who attacked me were those who normally would not see my films, and those who were especially vehement about my films were those who had not seen my films. But most media and critics would not talk about the film. Jiang Xun, for example, was asking why was it that no one discussed the issue raised in the film as it was an important issue that was worth serious discussion. So it’s as if the society purposely wanted to ignore it. There was this suspicious silence. That was why I was very depressed and felt that there was no way out. It wasn’t until Wang Shau-Di, who really knows me well and knew my condition then, asked me out. She asked me, “Ah-Liang, why did you make *The River* and why did you choose to handle the father-son relationship the way you did? Didn’t you have another option?” A lot of people had asked me that: I could have dealt with the situation this way or that way, but why the way that I chose? But I didn’t have any other choice. This was it. So Wang Shau-Di said, “So this is you and you have to appreciate this thing in you and about you.” I feel that Wang Shau-Di really understands me and she’s been most supportive. And I came out of my depression. And of course I needed someone to give me that timely push and to tell me that it’s okay. I think the fact that there was no discussion about the film or the issue was a social problem. They neglect the real issue and talk about other things.

**CF:** Because *The River* is the most difficult of your films to deal with.

**TM:** Yes. Someone told me that I made a film that managed to offend all three parties: women, because her husband and son are gay; men, because I touched on something that is forbidden: incest; and the gay community because of the portrayal of the sex scenes. Gay men prefer films like *The Birdcage* or *The Wedding Banquet*. “You offended all three groups and that’s why you are through.”
SW: But I don't feel that the film is offensive to women.

TM: You know at that time even the gay community was very upset at me and was publishing negative reviews of the film and of me. They were critiquing me for showing the dark and negative sides of the gay community and that those were not true portrayals of gay men. But I think that was really absurd. Last year they did a retrospective screening of my films, and someone told me that he didn’t dare see The River when it first came out. But then when he finally saw it at the screening he was deeply moved. It is strange that people are scared of seeing films like this. Some people also ask me why I would make these dark and depressing films because I seem to be such a cheerful person. I think this is very complicated because you can’t see the other side of me, the midnight side. Recently I had this very deep feeling. Two weeks ago, I felt quite down in Taipei. It has been rare that I’d be emotionally low. I have been quite stable as I now know how to balance my life. Even when things are rough I manage to handle it, by taking a walk on the beach for example. But that day I was very down. I woke up during the night, and I was very thirsty. I lived on the third floor and had to go down to the first floor to get water. My joints were also hurting, so I limped down the stairs and all of a sudden it dawned on me that I was in my own film! [Laughs.] I never felt that I would live like my films. But that kind of feeling or realization was horrifying. How did I end up in my own film? It was very sad. It’s like in your films you are dealing with the subject of loneliness and alienation, so you should know loneliness very well, and know how to face it. But one day when you find yourself feeling lonely, it is very hard and very uncomfortable. You still can't accept it.

CF: Your films are about loneliness and alienation, but I don't think of them as sad films. To me they are happy films.

TM: Yes, people tell me my films are sad. And I always know they are not. Things would always be okay after my characters finish crying.

CF: I especially like the ending of Vive L’Amour when Yang Kuei-Mei is crying. It is very positive that you show somebody crying.

TM: I think that crying means that you still have feelings.
CF: Yes, that’s why the film is not sad. Even if you cry with her, you still feel better because it shows that somebody is still alive and there is still something going on.

TM: I think that today when people go see movies they are looking for laughter. Before, people would see the Greek tragedies, but today they won’t. In fact both laughter and crying are art, but people choose laughter. Before the old Chinese women were all looking for tragic melodramas, but today they want comedies.

CF: This is America.

TM: Yeah.

CF: Americans have to be happy and smile. Americans have banned crying.

TM: I see a lot of American films on the plane and then I did research. I found that in American films, there is a liking of clapping and applauding. In any situation that needs celebration, there would be clapping. This is a people who like applauding and clapping collectively. American films are all about success, but the kind of success that they preach is getting the blonde girl.

CF: Right. But American films weren’t always like that. Chaplin is not about that. Chaplin is very sad.

TM: Yes, and Keaton is also sad. That’s interesting as the early comedians were really expressing a sad message. But today comedians like Jim Carrey are about happiness. I find it ridiculous that when you can have a dialogue with God, all you can think of is getting revenge on your coworkers.²

Notes

1 Translator’s note: Yuan is a Chinese concept of predestined relationship.

2 Tsai is referring to Bruce Almighty.