

# In Taiwan's Mountains, a Director Works to Slow Life Down

Tsai Ming-liang's cinema of illness, desire, and the power of attention.

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*With his shaved head and bushy eyebrows, along with his spontaneous laughter, the filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang has the demeanor of a mischievous monk. **Photograph by William Laxton / Courtesy Homegreen Films***

The filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang moved to his current home, on the verdant mountainsides that ring Taipei, seven years ago, after he became afflicted with a mysterious ailment resembling panic attacks. Around the same time, Lee Kang-sheng, his longtime collaborator and muse, suffered a relapse of a neck problem that had long troubled him. Looking for a place to convalesce outside the city center, the two came across a block of abandoned, half-constructed apartments, stretching the length of a deserted street. They moved in and began rehabilitating the buildings alongside their own bodies.

"I never knew where I would die until I moved here," Tsai told me when I visited him one afternoon in the middle of July. "I thought this place was maybe where I finally belonged." Tsai, now sixty-three, was waiting for me at his

dining table, wearing a gray T-shirt and flip-flops. Two large bunches of green bananas that Lee had picked, complete with their blossoms, rested on the kitchen counter. Tsai has a shaved head and bushy eyebrows that, along with his spontaneous laughter, give him the demeanor of a mischievous monk. A tower of film cannisters lined the wall alongside life-size Buddhist statues, and scattered awards, from Taipei's Golden Horse to Berlin's Silver Bear, were shelved haphazardly under a staircase.

Tsai and Lee are the only residents on their road, inhabiting a tastefully renovated rowhouse, which doubles as their studio, sectioned between raw concrete units left in their

unfinished condition and overgrown with tropical plants that peek through the gaping windows. The labyrinthine, hollowed-out frame and its surroundings have become settings for most of his recent projects. "I realized that I could shoot all of my films from this mountain," he told me.

Over the past thirty years, Tsai and Lee have created a body of work unlike any other in world cinema, capturing urban ennui and desire amid the ethereal, neon-lit dreamscapes of Taipei and other Asian metropolises. Though their work has been lumped by some critics into the umbrella category "slow cinema"—a loose coalition of film-festival regulars like Béla Tarr and Apichatpong Weerasethakul, identifiable by their long takes, minimal plot, and predilection for stationary cameras—the pair have followed their own path,

*Tsai and his longtime collaborator Lee Kang-sheng in a scene from Tsai's documentary film "Afternoon" (2015). Photograph by Chen Chien-Chung / Courtesy Homegreen Films*

constructing a symbolic universe in which loneliness and longing become material, manifesting in floods, leaks, and droughts, as well as diseases both existential and corporeal.

When I met Tsai, Taiwan was just emerging from a soft lockdown, ordered after the island saw its worst outbreak of *COVID-19* following a year with little to no community transmission. Under normal circumstances, he and Lee would be travelling around the world, attending film festivals and premières for “Days,” which after delays eventually came out in the U.S. this August. Instead, as on every morning for the past year, Tsai began his day by sweeping the floor, brewing coffee, and making a simple lunch for himself and Lee. “Lee Kang-sheng sleeps until very late,” Tsai said. As if on cue, a groggy-looking Lee—now fifty-two, but carrying an ageless insouciance that has graced his entire career—ventured shirtless downstairs to investigate the commotion before promptly returning to his bedroom. Despite much speculation about the nature of their relationship in the course of their collaboration, the two describe it most often in familial terms: Tsai the parent and Lee the wayward teen-ager. (After many years of ambiguity, Tsai announced in 2018, during a referendum on same-sex marriage, that, while he was gay, Lee was not.)

Tsai has filled the rest of his time painting, a practice he picked up in recent years. We went upstairs to his studio to look at canvases he had been working on during the pandemic, a series of oil paintings drawn from set

photographs of "Days." One showed a young man resting on a floral futon, playing with his cell phone, while covered by a damask blanket; in another, two men sprawled naked on a hotel bed, swathed in earthy reds reminiscent of a Francis Bacon. Tsai's own mattress was visible on the floor behind him, and his laundry hung out to dry on the balcony.

"We were lucky to move here," Tsai said. "If we had gotten sick in Taipei, we might have been very uncomfortable.

There's another kind of life here, slower. You have to take care of your surroundings. You need to cut the grass, tend to the trees." Tsai pointed proudly to his hand-held mower resting outside. "This is a place to recuperate," he said.

"Before, I always had a feeling like I wanted to come back here. Now, I have the feeling that I want to go out, although with a different mind-set. It makes me feel like the world is something that can be truly appreciated."

The director of eleven feature films and several shorts, Tsai was born in Kuching, Malaysia, in 1957, to Hakka Chinese farmers. Raised partly by his maternal grandparents in the city, Tsai would accompany them to the cinema every evening, often watching movies back to back as his grandparents traded off shifts at their nearby noodle stand. In his twenties, he moved to Taipei to study theatre, working as a scriptwriter and director for television before making his first feature, "Rebels of the Neon God" (1992), which electrified audiences with its unvarnished depictions of urban Taiwanese youth. He had asked Lee, then a recent high-school graduate with an uncanny resemblance to

James Dean, to act for him after seeing him propped on a motorbike outside an arcade, serving as a lookout for police raids on illegal gambling. Lee has since appeared in every major Tsai project.

Tsai is part of the second generation of the Taiwanese New Cinema, a movement of filmmakers who developed a style of dreamlike tranquillity and an attentiveness to everyday life at the end of Taiwan's long period of martial law. His films departed, however, from those of peers like Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien, which had dealt explicitly with the White Terror, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang party's reign over the island. Tsai's films instead take place after 1987, when Chiang's son, Ching-kuo, ceded one-party rule to the current multiparty democracy. The milieu they portray—urban youth coming of age during Taiwan's economic boom—is drawn more to American pop culture than to the Chinese mainland. Although his early films revelled in the newfound sexual and political freedoms of the period, they also hinted at the darker underpinnings of Taiwan's assimilation into the global market, focussing on drifters, idlers, and insomniacs on the fringes of the world's supply chain.

With "Rebels," Tsai also introduced a queer sensibility into Taiwanese cinema, debuting Lee's alter ego, Hsiao Kang—the Chinese characters can mean "Little Health" or "Little Wealth"—an aimless cram-school dropout who becomes fixated on a handsome, small-time hoodlum. Their follow-up, "Vive L'Amour" (1994), which depicts a trio of solitary

Taipei residents passing through the same staged real-estate agent's apartment, garnered international acclaim and further cemented the hallmarks of Tsai's aesthetic: the use of parallel narratives, themes of repressed longings and missed connections, and Lee's unique dramatic presence, marked by his androgynous impassivity. Around this time, Tsai observed that Lee had begun suffering from a painful stiffness in his neck, and made it the plotline of his next film, "The River" (1997), in which Hsiao Kang finds himself paralyzed after floating in a polluted stream. As he seeks various remedies, we also peer into the lives of his father, a closeted retiree who frequents Taipei's gay saunas, and his mother, an elevator attendant conducting an affair with a pornography distributor. A leak that begins as a trickle in their apartment grows gradually into a torrential current, suggesting how the unspoken can come spilling out in unanticipated forms.

In 1998, Tsai was invited to contribute to an anthology envisioning the year 2000. "By then, a lot of problems had already appeared," Tsai remembered. "The earth had been damaged for a long time. In Taiwan, I thought it might be raining without end." For what would become his film "The Hole," Tsai landed on the idea of an epidemic of "Taiwan Fever," a virus suspected to originate from cockroaches that induces people to crawl on all fours and shun the light. Two neighbors, played by Lee and Yang Kuei-mei, remain in their apartment building despite its being condemned as a virus hotspot, and begin to interact through a strange gap

that appears in the floor between them. Interspersed among scenes of their increasingly desperate existences are fantastical, gloriously campy musical interludes, set to the songs of Grace Chang, a mid-century pop star. They infuse a dreamy quality to the film's atmosphere of isolation, providing an outlet for emotional overflow in a gesture that seems jarringly prescient.

Although his international profile continued to grow, Tsai found it difficult to find commercial traction at home. While some critics accused his films of inaccessibility, domestic productions were also finding themselves crowded out by Hollywood exports. Tsai and Lee set up their own production company in 2000, and devised a direct-to-consumer promotional strategy: Tsai would arrive unannounced at offices, and visit college cafeterias during lunchtime to sell tickets to his own movies. "In half an hour, I could sell one to two rows," he said, not without pride. It's hard to imagine many other filmmakers of Tsai's stature in the same position, and he began to feel a mounting frustration with the demands of commercial cinema.

"Goodbye, Dragon Inn" (2003) takes place in a derelict movie theatre on the night of its last screening, as it shows King Hu's 1967 martial-arts classic "Dragon Inn." Tsai's film has the air of a vigil, as ghostly apparitions walk the aisles of the sparsely attended theatre, alongside the workers who had barely managed to keep it afloat before its closure. The demise of communal spaces forms a recurring theme in Tsai's work, even as it has progressed from tales of

youthful alienation to portrayals of the precarity of migrant workers in films like "I Don't Want to Sleep Alone" (2006). His films trace an arc resembling that of the region, as decades of unfettered economic expansion gave way from initial exuberance to the reality of shrinking outlets for community and consolation.

In "Stray Dogs" (2013), his last feature film before "Days," Lee plays a "sandwich man," a human signpost advertising luxury apartments. Tsai's camera remains unsparingly fixed on Lee as he is brutally lashed by wind and rain during his shifts. Meanwhile, his two children squat in a vacant building and roam around Taipei's grocery stores for free samples. Although some audiences might find Tsai's approach exhausting—when Lee grasps a chicken leg, we know we'll watch him gnaw it to the bone—his durational demands also defy the carelessness by which we so quickly overlook things and people. "Stray Dogs" ends with a twenty-minute scene of two characters gazing intently at a faded mural on the side of an abandoned building; watching them, it's hard not to imagine that they are watching a movie.

When "Stray Dogs" premiered, at Venice, where it received the Grand Jury Prize, Tsai began to float the possibility of his retiring from commercial filmmaking. The labor involved in big productions was straining his health, and slowly, over the years, he had begun to come up with fewer ideas for narratives. "I wanted to get rid of screenplays, stories, things that audiences expect, and look for a substitute," he



told me.

Tsai began to stage and film a series of vignettes starring Lee, dressed in the saffron robes of a Buddhist monk, performing a version of walking meditation throughout various global cities, such as Marseilles, Tokyo, and Kuching. Inspired by Xuanzang, the Tang-dynasty monk who made a years-long journey to India, the “Walker” films function like moving paintings, meticulously framed compositions that allow the eye to linger on every detail as Lee proceeds, pace by pace. “Why can’t cinemas be a museum?” Tsai asked me. By paring back narrative, Tsai hopes that his films can counteract the expectation that audiences be led by the filmmaker, allowing them instead to exercise their own faculties of attention.

During this period, Lee began to fall ill again. He suffered a minor stroke while the pair were visiting Vienna for a festival in 2014, and his neck problem also returned. While taking Lee to his treatments, Tsai asked to record him. On a trip to Hong Kong, Tsai filmed Lee as embers of burning mugwort leaves fell painfully onto his back and shoulders during moxibustion, a traditional Chinese therapy. Tsai found the footage compelling but wasn’t sure exactly how to use it.

In 2017, Tsai ordered a bowl of noodles from a young Laotian immigrant named Anong Hounghuangsy, at a food court in Thailand, and began chatting with him on his break. The two stayed in touch after Tsai returned to Taiwan. “Anong would invite friends over to drink beer at his place

and call me," Tsai said. "I became very interested in his life." Finding himself increasingly drawn into Hougheuangsy's daily rhythms and routines—the two would video-chat as the younger man washed vegetables in his bathroom, steamed sticky rice in a bamboo basket, prayed at a makeshift shrine—Tsai brought a small team to Thailand to film him.

He decided to pair the two sections into what would become "Days." Composed primarily of documentary footage, the film shows Lee and Hougheuangsy leading their separate lives: Lee, his face contorted in pain, receiving treatment for his neck, and Hougheuangsy, toiling alone in his shared apartment or browsing a night market. Tsai brings them together for only one sequence, in which Lee pays for an erotic massage. (Tsai shot the scene in one day, in his hotel room in Thailand.) For nineteen minutes, the camera basks in Lee and Hougheuangsy's presence, their bodies bathed in the hotel's curtained glow. Hougheuangsy, kneeling astride Lee, works his way from the soles of Lee's feet to the palms of his hands. Lee's face, pressed into a pillow, purples from pain and pleasure. Afterward, the two men shower, eat together at a restaurant, and go their own ways. "Days" is unsentimental about the transactional nature of their exchange, yet it also affirms the healing potential of physical connection. Filmed before the pandemic, the scene offers, through its tactility and the care and attention given and received in it, a salve for viewers who might require convalescing from their own

ills.

*Two men sit in a Bangkok restaurant, in a scene from Tsai's feature film "Days," from 2020. Photograph by Chang Jhong-Yuan / Courtesy Homegreen Films*

Tsai's films never tell the viewer what to look at, instead simply providing an opportunity to carefully observe each surrounding environment. "Days" begins with a long take of Lee, sitting in an armchair in their living room, gazing through a window as a typhoon rages outside. Reflected on the glass, tree branches and raindrops appear dappled over Lee's visage. Through the course of their three-decade collaboration, Tsai has continued to shoot Lee just as carefully and enthrallingly. "I never thought I would spend my entire life filming the same person," Tsai said. "But Lee is always changing. From young to a little older, to getting a little heavier. His face and expression are always changing, too. These are interests I'll never lose."

Lifelong commitments like these are rare in today's cinema, where most actors and directors cycle through projects as quickly as their contracts expire. Tsai's output instead resembles an extended family, peopled by reincarnations of the same characters, played by a rotating cast of nonprofessional actors. That sense of kinship leads to a porousness between fiction and nonfiction in his films. The tenderness of "Days" hinges on a real gift. A few years ago, Tsai's producer brought him a music box that played the theme song from Charlie Chaplin's "Limelight" (1952), a tune that had become a popular standard for Mandarin

singers during Tsai's childhood. In "Days," Lee hands Anong the gift after their massage, in a gesture of gratitude; its final scene shows Anong listening to its soft, twinkling melody at a bus stop, before departing.

Over time, Tsai's films have become quieter and more meditative, with longer takes, fewer cuts, and less camera movement, as if whittling away all excess. That development might belie a diminishing faith in cinema's capabilities, if not for the intimacy and concentration of "Days." When I asked Tsai about the direction in his work, he glanced outside. "The path of my films is like planting a tree," he answered. "After being planted, it grows by itself. I know what kind of tree it is, but not what shape it will grow into."

After our conversation, Tsai excused himself to rest upstairs while I strolled around his back yard, taking in various locations that appear in "Days." Tsai had mentioned that the look of the area changed continuously, from clear to rainy days, morning to night. The fish tank was full of mottled koi, and tufts of grass had sprouted through patches of dirt. A tree that, in Tsai's film, is enveloped by billowing clouds was now standing resolutely in the glaring sun.

I had wondered aloud to Tsai if we might learn any lessons from the past year of sickness, and how our world might begin to heal. Tsai said that the question was difficult to answer. "You can't just get better, without expecting ever to

get sick again," he said, after a pause. "But you can start to cherish the things present, knowing that nothing is certain."

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