



Abé Mark Nornes

Hou Hsiao-hsien and Narrative Space

The center [of film] is the movement, not movements but the logic of a consequent and temporally coherent action. The vision of the image is its narrative clarity and that clarity hangs on the conversion of space into place, the constant realization of a center in function of narrative purpose, narrative movement.

—Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space”¹

In the epigraph above, Stephen Heath is writing about the narrative structures and operation of the Hollywood classical style, the coherence and seamlessness of which he pits against the art cinema of Jean-Luc Godard and Straub-Huillet. These filmmakers, for Heath, represent a more complex address with a “certain freedom of contradictions.”² He is, of course, mounting an ideological attack on Hollywood to valorize the art cinema alternative. I will not rehearse the theories of suture here, but I am interested in the way Hou Hsiao-hsien converts space into place. On the face of it, Hou would seem to affiliate with the other filmmakers, as his films feel too oblique to think of as “centered around narrative purpose” and do seem to offer up the freedom to contemplate daily reality with all its contradictions, the qualities that Heath promotes. Indeed, what is so striking about the cinema of

Hou Hsiao-hsien is its odd combination of randomness – of narrative events, of *mise-en-scène*, of narrative space – with masterful control. That these two are brought into spectacular tension is our starting point here.

Hou’s approach to cinema is singular. One knows it when one sees it. This is his real connection to the Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, with whom he is often compared. They both developed such idiosyncratic approaches to narrative cinema that no one truly mimics them, either because their styles are too specific or simply too difficult to pull off. As for Hou, he has steadily loosened up what appeared to be a complex set of unwritten rules. They were at their most rigid and rigorous in *A City of Sadness* (1989): put simply, Hou liked to find a particular view on a given location and stubbornly stick to it. He set an axis of viewing through the set,

1) Stephen Heath, “Narrative Space,” *Screen*, Volume 17, Number 3 (1976), 86

2) *Ibid.*, 90

3) These qualities and more are explored in great depth in Abé Mark Nornes and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, *Staging Memories: Hou Hsiao-hsien’s City of Sadness* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014)

4) The most spectacular examples may be found in the films of Edward Yang; I analyzed his construction of off-screen space shortly after encountering his first films in Abé Mark Nornes, “Terrorizer,” *Film Quarterly*, Volume 8, Number 2 (Spring 1989), 64–72





A City of Sadness, 1989

The first scene following the title – in an Altmanesque cacophony of action, six calligraphic scrolls adorn the walls in three rooms, and women are hand-inspecting two more. A vase, which will soon become the most prominent object in the film, sits on a table, hardly noticeable in all the action and visual clutter. (Fig. 1)

moving his camera forward and backward with only the occasional (and strategic) pan or track. Close-ups were rare and the long take standard. Shot-reverse shot figures are oddly staged, the few times he uses them.³

This makes for a unique conversion of space into place. One becomes hyperaware of off-screen space because of the lack of pans and reverse shots, a feature one finds in the work of other Taiwanese directors, most notably Edward Yang.⁴ Spaces remain slightly disorienting and opaque – remain *space* at some level – until the gradual repetition of views nurtures a familiarity with their nooks, crannies, pathways, and the objects contained therein. This brings

me to the topic of this essay, the calligraphy in Hou Hsiao-hsien's films and its role in the construction of this peculiar narrative space.

When it comes to Hou, the last thing one thinks of is art direction. His sets – domestic or public—are messy, littered with the objects of daily life. The tightly controlled frame is full of props, and their placement would *appear* to be random at best (though it certainly is not). This understated approach is in contrast to, say, the splashy, more overtly designed films of someone like Tsai Ming-liang. This is a fount of Hou's realism, as well as yet another difference from Ozu, who was famous for obsessing endlessly over the placement of props to achieve



Abé Mark Nornes

graphic matching and other effects (he would peer through the viewfinder and tell people to move some prop three centimeters “closer to Tokyo”).⁵

Among these props, works featuring calligraphy beckon to us. That is because calligraphy pops. Perhaps one factor is its high design; it is certainly the case that our attention naturally gravitates toward linguistic signs. This makes calligraphy a prop unlike any other. Unlike an oil painting, or a vase for that matter, it fulfills a wide array of functions. First, it is marked by a spectrum of legibility. Where stylistic flourish or linguistic archaisms render it incomprehensible, the calligrapher serves as pretty ornament; at the same time, its mere presence can signify class and social status or period. Where it is legible, calligraphy proves itself a robust toolbox for inventive screenwriters and art directors. It delivers messages, letters, writs, and proclamations. It conjures spells and incantations. Adorning walls, it can comment on narrative action. In the hand, it can provide business for characters. The copulative possibilities of Chinese writing, through the montage of radicals, are provocative.⁶ In all these cases, calligraphy sets itself apart from the props surrounding it, calling for attention by virtue of the ontological force of the brush-written word. This is to say

nothing of its role in company logos, titles, credit sequences, intertitles, subtitles, and “the end” cards.

I have come to appreciate these many narrative functions – as well as the ubiquity of calligraphy in East Asian cinema – by working off a corpus. My research assistants and I have pulled frame grabs of calligraphy from DVDs in University of Michigan’s Donald Hall Collection.⁷ This corpus is 2,653 images and growing (there are over seventy images from Hou films alone). One of the astonishing discoveries in this body of work is a set of fascinating cultural tendencies across the region. For example, Korean filmmakers, particularly those working in period films, often place calligraphic folding screens along the back walls of their sets. Their actors perform before a beautiful paperscape of calligraphic characters. By way of contrast, Japanese filmmakers use calligraphic props to

5) Tadao Satō, “The Art of Yasujiro Ozu,” *The Study of the History of the Cinema*, Number 4 (1974), 96

6) I am referencing Sergei Eisenstein here, but the Soviet theorist actually had only the most superficial sense of the complexity of Chinese characters. Furthermore, he was deploying it as an analogue to cinematic montage, whereas I am pointing to filmmakers that actually play with linguistic signs in their diegeses.

7) This image archive was constructed with the help of student assistants Jini Kim, Sanako Fujioka and Emily Ho.





tip the balance of their compositions. They will place lanterns or scroll paintings at the edge of the frame, essentially creating a negative space within which the actors move (Figure 2).

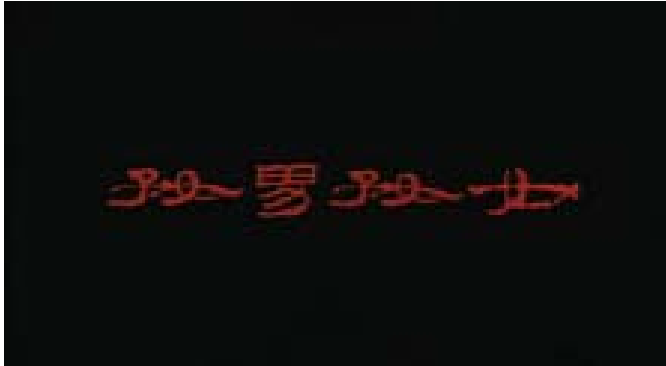
As for the filmmakers of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, they curiously default to *symmetry* when calligraphy enters narrative space. This seems to be quite unconscious. Chinese cinematography manuals only give conventional, classical definitions for symmetry: filmmakers use it to evoke the monumental. It is occasionally deployed for this effect, but generally the most mundane *mise-en-scène* snaps into symmetry when calligraphy is visible. Even filmmakers I have mentioned this to are surprised by this widespread and quite unconscious tendency, including Hou.

Now let us consider Hou Hsiao-hsien's use of calligraphy. Arguably, the construction of narrative space begins with title cards, which instantly set a context for the photographic images to follow. Hou's early films all used a standard non-serifed typeface typical of Central Motion Picture Company productions of the era. After he went independent, the director captured the freedom to design title sequences for each film. He usually used typefaces, with the most notable calligraphic title gracing *Good Men, Good Women* (1995; Figure 3). Hou explains



Calligraphy exerts a pressure on *mise-en-scène* in different ways for Korean, Japanese and Chinese filmmakers. Korean films often drape the background in calligraphy, Chinese filmmakers use symmetry, and Japanese shuttle such props to the edges. (Fig. 2)





Hou usually used typefaces, with the most notable calligraphic title gracing *Good Men, Good Women*, 1995. (Fig. 3)



An unusual instance of symmetry in Hou's oeuvre, from *A Summer at Grandpa's*, 1984 (Fig. 4)

his choice: "I go by instinct. It ultimately depends on the content. In the case of *A City of Sadness*, the title contains the strong word 'sorrow' (*beiqing*). It describes an emotion and is pretty powerful. Because of this, I chose to use typography. In a way it expresses sadness better. In contrast, I chose calligraphy for *Good Men, Good Women* because the film itself called for it. I went through an art book filled with many examples of works by famous old calligraphers. When I found one I liked, I just cut out the three characters I needed and put them together."⁸

This montage of characters is not atypical in the age of the digital remix. Surprisingly enough, designers in the Chinese-language cinemas are often scanning characters from different authors, styles and eras to construct their titles. That Hou did this back in 1995 is revealing. It belies his casual attitude about this art – something rather at odds with his persnickety approach to cinema.

It is perhaps in this casual mode that he sometimes follows convention and adjusts his seemingly random, unruly *mise-en-scène* to the symmetrical composition that Chinese seems to demand. *A Summer at Grandpa's* (1984; Figure 4) has the strongest example. This is probably because it features a complex combination of graphic and cultural elements that bore down on the cinematography. It is a formal wedding ceremony. There are couplets on the wall, with two candles before them. A priest stands precisely in the middle, his robe split by a symmetrical red trim and with his hands splayed out to either side. Above his head is a bold circle with the symmetrical character for double happiness. It shines in red neon no less. Moreover, not one but *two* couples bow before

8) Hou Hsiao-hsien interview by author, August 15, 2011 (interpretation by Vivian Tsu-i Chiang)





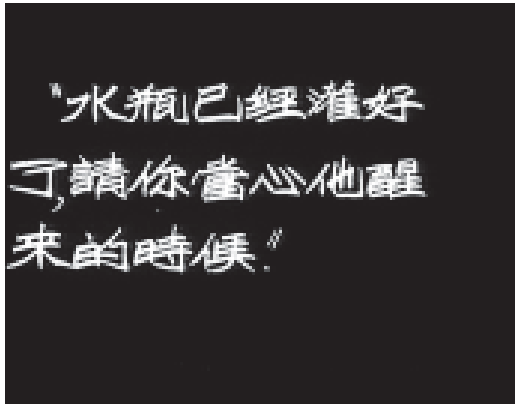
Two shots from *The Puppetmaster*, 1993. While most Chinese filmmakers snap to symmetrical composition whenever calligraphy enters the frame, Hou's approach is eclectic and unpredictable (left). An exception is the stage. (Fig. 5)

the priest, in synch. It is a scene that demands symmetry.

However, with few exceptions, Hou eschews symmetrical *mise-en-scène*, even for sets decorated with couplets. The mirrored structure of the couplet, gracing either walls or portals, exerts no pressure on Hou and his cinematographers. Other values guide their composition, notably the geometric complexities and possibilities of the built environment, particularly that of Chinese and Japanese architecture with its proliferation of frames – screens, sliding doors, windows and walls with the wooden framework exposed. This is not the off-kilter composition of Japanese cinema. At the same time, what appears to be ad hoc and random at first glance seems to have a certain tendency, if not a logic. Calligraphy, when it appears in Hou's films, gravitates toward the center, even if it is rarely centered. The axis of the camera is always nudged away, pushing the sign, painting or couplet slightly to the side.

There is one curious exception to this rule, and that takes place late in *The Puppetmaster* (1993). Up to this point, all instance of calligraphy follow the tendency described above, where the placement of calligraphy would appear rather random. However, there is a moment of symmetry occurring late in the film, when the traveling puppet show has been thoroughly co-opted by the Japanese propaganda machine. In previous performances, the symmetrical placement of the small stage's calligraphy is offset by a slightly oblique camera placement. However, for the final performance celebrating Japanese exploits in the theater of war, the camera snaps to a frontal view, framed by two calligraphic banners across the bottom of the stage and the cinematic frame, reading: "The Taipei, Bunsan District Advance Guard for the Annihilation of America and Britain" (*Taipei Bunsangun Eibei gekimetsu suishintai*; Figure 5). Suddenly, the *mise-en-scène* departs from Hou's eclectic composition to follow conven-





The Goddess, Wu Yonggang, 1934
A calligraphic intertitle from the silent era (Fig. 6)

tion – the frontality and symmetry lend the tiny puppet stage a monumentality that makes this stage, this play about Japanese militarism, seem so foreign to Hou’s cinema – and perhaps foreign to Taiwan in a circuitous, formal manner.

Considering this seemingly clever exception to his own anti-symmetrical *mise-en-scène*, perhaps Hou’s departures from, or deployment of, the conventional Chinese framing of calligraphy are less casual than they seem at first glance. In the pages that follow, I would like to explore these many aspects of the cinematic calligrapher in Hou’s most complex and powerful film to date, *A City of Sadness*.

What if we were to assume a rigorous placement of calligraphy, as opposed to indiscriminant or slapdash? After all, everything else about Hou’s filmic form seems to be so calculated. While there is one scene in *A City of Sadness* that features calligraphy quite prominently, most viewers would probably ask, “What calligraphy?” This analysis will likely surprise such readers, jogging their memories by pointing to the ubiquity of the brushed word throughout this film, which is so full of

different kinds of writing. Indeed, it is the many forms of writing that help make *A City of Sadness* such a complex work of art. The writing that inevitably attracts the most attention is the intertitles. The photographer at the putative center of the story, Wen-ching, is a deaf-mute. To communicate, he and his silent interlocutors scribble in notebooks. Hou gives us access to these written conversations through silent cinema-style intertitles. However, it should be pointed out that, while Hou’s intertitles are black cards with white typographic fonts, Chinese intertitles of the silent era were, in fact, brushed (Figure 6).⁹

Another major form of writing in the film – also handwritten with pen or pencil – is the diary of Wen-ching’s lover Hinomi. Along with Wen-ching’s intertitles, her writing establishes her as a second major enunciative position for the narrative. As Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and I discuss in *Staging Memories: Hou Hsiao-hsien’s City of Sadness*, these are the wellsprings of the storytelling. Significantly, both defy the pedagogical nation building of the newly arrived KMT, with their loudspeaker and radio proclamations. That these writings are by a deaf-mute and a woman builds a rich irony into what

9) We analyze the intertitles at length in *Staging Memories*.



A City of Sadness

"Father is innocent. You have to live with dignity." A message substituting cloth for paper, finger for brush, and blood for ink. This hints at the intimate connection between calligraphy and the human body. (Fig. 7)

could be a heavy-handed nationalist project in less skilled hands.

A final form of writing we should consider before turning to calligraphy is the message. The film is filled with the delivery of messages and letters. Almost invariably, they bear the worst of tidings. Many report the untimely demise of a loved one due to the political violence. The most unbearable of the messages hovers between crude handwriting and the calligraphic. Wen-ching visits the family of a friend he knew in prison. He hands the wife a message from her husband – "Father is innocent. You have to live with dignity." – scrawled on cloth instead of paper, with the husband's finger instead of a brush, and not in ink but rather his own blood (Figure 7). It is this intimate connection to the (once moving, once living) human body that connects this scene with the calligraphic traditions of East Asia. The remarkably sensitive tools of writing – rice paper, ink and stone, brush – link any script to the absent act of writing and the absent human being at the center of that moment in time.

This complex temporality of the calligraph

is made palpably clear in the scene most prominently featuring calligraphy. It occurs twenty-five minutes into the film when a Japanese woman arrives at the hospital to bid farewell to Hinomi (Figure 8, upper left corner). She bears gifts: a kimono, a bamboo kendo sword, and a calligraphic scroll. The two sit, side-by-side in formal Japanese style on *tatami* (Figure 8, top-center). Shizuko, the Japanese woman, explains that the painting is for Hinoe's brother, who was present when her own brother wrote it. This sets the stage for a flashback which goes largely unmarked – a typical strategy employed by Hou that builds layers of ambiguity and undecidable temporalities into his narrative. Here, the jump in time is marked only by Shizuko's hair style and a subtle change in lighting. She plays "Red Dragonfly" ("Akatonbo"), a Japanese children's song, for Hinoe's class of students (Figure 8, top-right). Her diegetic song slowly dissolves into a non-diegetic solo piano rendition and another undecidable ellipsis leading to an image of Shizuko wearing the kimono to arrange flowers (Figure 8, center-right).

The scene of writing arrives after yet an-



A City of Sadness

In this remarkable sequence, Hou has woven the tangled temporality of the calligraph – that visual trace of a long absent event of the human body in action – with the equally *and similarly* variegated time of cinema. The sequence starts at the upper-left and proceeds clockwise, ending with the center intertitle. (Fig. 8)

other ellipsis (Figure 8, bottom-right). Shizuko's brother carefully brushes a Japanese poem for the scroll while Hinoe observes, all the while grinding ink on an ink stone. The gifted painting, in fact, was created *collaboratively*. An intertitle displays not just the poem's Japanese-language text, but the calligraphic painting itself (see Figure 8, bottom-center):

Fly away as you like
I too will soon follow
We all together.

A voiceover intones the poem in Japanese – the voice inflected with a Chinese accent. Upon finishing the reading, the intertitle gives way to a view of Hinoe, Hinomi and Wen-ching, as the

sister delivers the presents to her brother; another ellipsis has taken place (Figure 8, bottom-left). The voice now diegetic, we retrospectively realize the flashback actually ended with the calligraphic intertitle – although the previous time's music continued – and the present of the film is flung forward to a Taiwan absent of Japanese. Incredibly, the complex layering of time continues. Hinoe begins telling a story about Japanese sentiments surrounding death and dying, as Wen-ching scrutinizes the painting in the background. Halfway through his story, Hinoe's story is interrupted, disappearing with a cut, and Hinomi finishes the story off by writing in Wen-ching's notebook (Figure 8,



center-left). Instead of intertitles, we hear Hinomi reading her writing in voice-over. The scene now ends with a silent soundtrack, the music having slowly faded to nothing, and a typographic silent-cinema-style intertitle that finally delivers a Chinese translation of the calligraphic painting (Figure 8, center). The next scene returns us to the hospital entranceway where the phenomenally complex sequence began. *Hou has woven the tangled temporality of the calligraph – that visual trace of a long absent event of the human body in action – with the equally and similarly variegated time of cinema.*

Calligraphy also plays a central role in the *space* of the film, or to be specific, in the conversion of space into place. The more straightforward and conventional of the contributions involves the establishment of setting. *A City of Sadness* depicts Taiwan's entry into a postcolonial world. One example comes from the powerful opening scene, when the eldest brother nervously awaits the birth of his child. The room is pitch black. In the background, two voices compete for the soundtrack. One is his wife, who screams in pain; the other is the Japanese emperor declaring an end to the Pacific War and Japan's colonization of Taiwan. The brother fidgets with a light bulb, which spills light over a calligraphic charm pasted to a

column. It reads "great happiness/felicity" (*hongxi*), and is brushed on a vertical strip of red paper with a gold border. The word and the paper, and the pasting of calligraphic charms or exhortations onto the architecture, are all cultural practices pre-dating and enduring the colonial occupation that is ending at this very moment. The scene introduces *A City of Sadness* as a (re-)birth of a nation that will be carrying many histories into the future.

There are some nineteen works of calligraphy in *A City of Sadness* (not including six rolled up scrolls sitting in vases), and not all make this kind of contribution to the establishment of setting or historical moment. Some appear only to grace the walls at happy moments like the opening of the restaurant or the wedding; others are partially obscured. At the same time, nearly all of them are bound by an unusual logic peculiar to Hou Hsiao-hsien and the unique character of his narrative space.

The conventional, classical film typically turns space into place through the deployment of a set of normalized cinematic forms. Entering a space for the first time, "common sense" leads the director to introduce the setting, and simultaneously orient the audience to spatial relationships of people and objects, with a wide "establishing shot." The camera then moves



Abé Mark Nornes

closer to the action, using two-shots, point of view shots and most especially the shot-reverse shot figure. This last strategy is the volleying back and forth of camera views from face to face. It was this complex of formal choices and realist conventions – combined with the *Quattrocento* optics of the apparatus – that so deeply engages human subjectivity and, according to the screen theory of the late twentieth century, connects it to ideology.

Hou eschews this system for one of his own device, a major reason he richly deserves this book. He does not chop his scenes up with montage, favoring instead the long take. This is one reason close-ups are few and far between. He rarely uses point of view shots; the only example in *A City of Sadness* displays the bloody calligraphic message from late husband to traumatized wife. Hou does use the establishing shot, in a sense. That is because *most* of his shots look and feel like establishing shots. However, whereas most filmmakers introduce viewers to a new set through a wide view mapping the coordinates between objects in an attempt to achieve a cognitive mastery of space, we could say that Hou by contrast *establishes a view*. Instead of moving in and around the set, he dwells on that view in long take to allow us to take it in, to settle in as it were, because

every time the narrative revisits that space we more than likely see a variant of that same view.

At this point, I cannot resist indulging in an anecdote about this unique approach to narrative space. I was introduced to Hou Hsiao-hsien by Angelika Wong, his former assistant director. She revealed that whenever they worked on a set for the first time, the staff would actually place bets on where Hou would place the camera.¹⁰ This story even surprised Hou himself, who had no idea this was going on behind his back. It suggests how crucial a decision that first placement is, as well as how deliberate a choice it is for the director, as everything in the film will happen there within the limits of that view. This unlikely dynamic between visual repetition and narrative novelty slowly but surely turns spaces into the most familiar kinds of places.

Attending to the calligraphic props helps us see how this works at the most basic level. Recall that red good luck charm from the opening scene. The room was so dark that the two-char-

10) This revelation took place at the interview with Hou referenced above.

11) This aspect of Hou's work is also explored in *Staging Memories*.





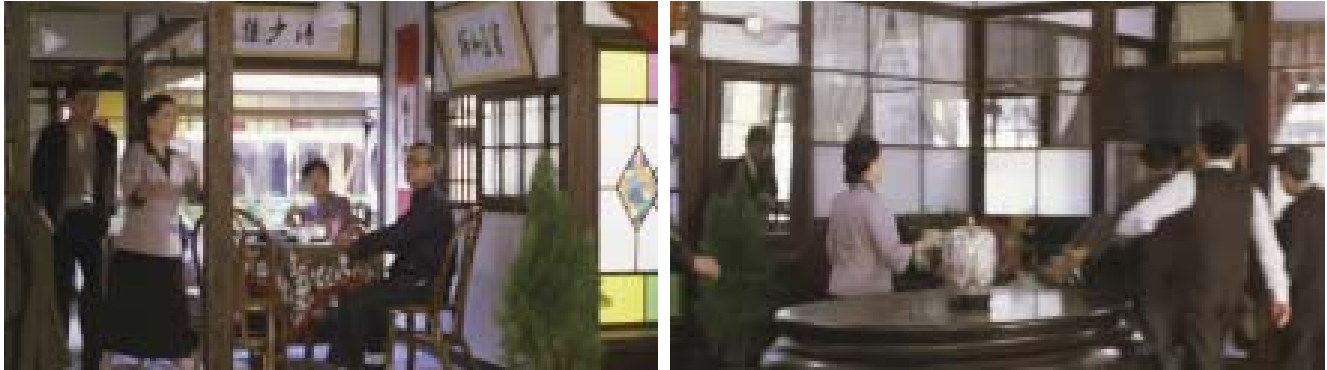
acter charm is one of the few recognizable objects. Much later in the film, Hou returns to the same view, now in the daytime. The ambient light from windows reveals a large work of calligraphy on the back wall. The small charm comes into view with a pan, jogging the viewer's memory – ah, this was the room where the oldest brother listened to the war's end as he awaited the birth of his son. The same dynamic of recognition holds true for the view on mute photographer Wen-ching's living room, where so much joy and sadness takes place. We immediately recognize the space at different times of day and with various configurations of furniture thanks to the calligraphic scroll painting in his *tokonoma*. It is in this patient, deliberate manner that Hou's narrative spaces encumber an overwhelming emotional resonance, where all the events occur in a given view/place vibrate against each other.¹¹ This is quite unlike any cinematic experience I can think of.

At the very same time, a curious parallel process occurs in relation to off-screen spaces. These, too, become narrativized in a gradual process. Since Hou nearly always returns to the initial view on a space, each view slowly establishing it as narrative space, the viewer has only the vaguest sense of the local geography. Hou

“activates” or “implements” adjacent spaces whenever a character walks into or out of the camera's view. In this way, he switches between familiar, established views, each with its energized off-screen spaces. *Then*, every once in a while, Hou will cut on a character walking off into off-screen space, and then into a previously established view in a new, temporally continuous shot; in other words, these are unusual matching shots in Hou's long take style and are designed to stitch contiguous or adjacent views together.

On other occasions, this kind of discovery is inspired by a simple, revelatory pan. One of the most important settings of the film is the Lin family restaurant, The Little Shanghai. Somewhere in the house is the kitchen where the eldest son awaits the birth of a child in the pre-credit scene. After the opening title, we see our first view of the lobby. The shot is striking for its visual disorder (Figure 1). Many people mill through the space in an Altmanesque cacophony of action as they prepare for the opening of the restaurant. An interior wall of windows adds a profusion of lines; six calligraphic scrolls adorn the walls in three rooms, and women are hand-inspecting two more. A vase, which will soon become the most prominent object in the film, sits on a table, hardly noticeable in all the





A City of Sadness. Late in the film, two central settings are finally connected by an economical and quite unusual pan. (Fig. 9)

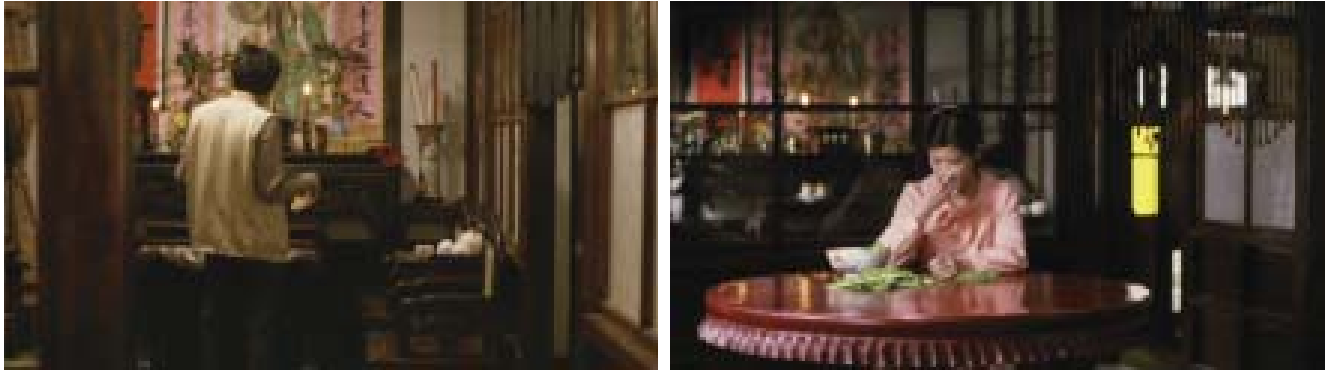
action and visual clutter. Hou cuts to another room somewhere in the house where the patriarch sits at a table; two scroll paintings grace either side of a shrine in the back room, obscured by plants and yet more windows. A third and final cut takes us to another space with the vase and a striking stained glass wall. Above it, calligraphy on a wood plank identifies the name of the establishment – the Little Shanghai – and another work of calligraphy is half-visible in a back room. The vase returns now, suggesting the camera has tracked back to the first space, but jumped a clean forty-five degrees to the right. However, even the most scrupulous viewer probably requires multiple viewings to make sense of this space. Not until the second half of the film, after Hou has introduced a number of other rooms to the house, does he stitch it all together. This is the scene where the eldest daughter-in-law marches past the restaurant table, and the camera pans to reveal the second-brother brought into the shrine room (Figure 9).

It is only at this point – halfway through the

film – that the narrative space of the Little Shanghai seems relatively complete. The connective tissue has been provided largely by the works of calligraphy ornamenting this initially bewildering space.

As the various spaces of *The Little Shanghai* gradually interconnect – mapping out the restaurant while acquiring emotional resonance – the semantics of the calligraphy transform and hold the potential for additional emotional amplification. The most striking piece of calligraphy in the film is in the shrine room. The shrine itself is dedicated to Guan Yu, a favored deity of Taiwanese merchants because he represents trustworthiness and personal loyalty. Adjacent to the shrine’s calligraphic couplet and directly above the ancestors’ tablet is a large *shou* (“longevity”) painted on red paper and framed. While not a typical practice, this could be a reference to the ancient *The Nine Songs*, which refers to a Palace of Longevity.¹² Wang Yi (ca 89–158 CE), the first commentator on this anthology wrote: “The Palace of Longevity is the place where people make of-





A City of Sadness. Hou shows only the edge of a calligraph with the character for "longevity" when we are introduced to the severity of the second brother's insanity (left); later he drapes it in darkness at a traumatic moment in Hinomi's life (right). (Fig. 10)

ferings to the spirits. To construct a shrine (a temple or altar) to worship the spirits and ancestors is nothing but for the purpose of obtaining longevity (for the worshipers). Thus it is named 'the Palace of Longevity.'¹²

This painting next to the shrine makes its first appearance a third of the way into the film at an appropriately celebratory scene when Hinomi visits the house. At this point, it is perfectly lit, the red paper and size of the character calling for attention – although for no particularly evident reason.

12) David Hawkes uses "House of Life" in his translation: "He is going to rest in the House of Life/His brightness is like that of the sun and moon" (David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets*, New York: Penguin, 1985, 104). Hawkes also notes "the *House of Life* – literally 'Palace of Longevity' (*shou gong*) – a chapel specially constructed for the reception of spirits conjured up in shamanistic seances" (118).

13) Translation by Shuen-fu Lin. I am indebted to Professor Lin for helping me understand the culture and practices around this character. I would also like to thank Tamako Akiyama, who helped me puzzle through this and other scenes, not to mention a small but significant technological problem.

Later in the film, we are introduced to the severity of the second brother's insanity when Hou cuts back to this space. The view is, once again, fractured by window panes, behind which the brother spastically walks (Figure 10; left). The "longevity" painting is still brightly lit, but now only its edge is visible. It is enough, just enough, to add a dark commentary on the brother's plight. In the last half of the film, the calligraphic painting floats in the background, obscured by architecture or only half lit. For example, one of the most moving moments of the film is when Hinomi sits alone at the table in the foreground, crying quietly (Figure 10; right). She is awaiting the return of photographer Wen-ching, and when he arrives it is clear they are in love and bound to be married; he then provides her an account of her brother's capture in the mountains. Appropriately enough, the "longevity" character is half-hidden by a dark shadow.

Only in Hou's cluttered narrative space, where singular views are repeated in long take, could a half-visible prop possess such a devas-





Abé Mark Nornes

tating effect. It is the combination of repetition and duration that enables viewers to master the clutter and recognize the smallest changes in setting and framing.

However, as I asserted above, calligraphy is a prop unlike any other. It calls for our attention. It emanates a kind of energy that filmmakers can tap into (or that others, like Jūzō Itami, avoid; he was known for ordering his staff to hide anything with text on it – and for this very reason).¹⁴ Calligraphy, when it appears in cinema, must be accounted for. This is why filmmakers in Korea drape backgrounds in swathes of brushed characters, why those in Japan shuttle calligraphic props to the edges of the frame, and why Chinese default to symmetry. The visual force of the calligraphy interacts with local aesthetic sensibilities, with architectural structures and styles, and cultural conventions.

As for Hou, it is likely that he feels a work of calligraphy is a prop *like* any other. Any object will suffice in the construction of his peculiar narrative space. Depending on the film, it might be a table, or a peculiarly shaped win-

dow, or merely some laundry hanging out to dry. Indeed, I had a chance to sit down with Hou to talk specifically about calligraphy. Our conversation ranged from fine art calligraphy to traditions of writing to his own filmmaking practice. Most of the things he had to say about calligraphy were a bit obvious, as if he were gamely playing along with the visiting scholar and his unexpected set of questions. His comments concerning calligraphy in his own films revealed that he never really thought about it that much. It was clear that he is an artist that mainly works by instinct. After over an hour of playing the scholar-filmmaker game, Hou stopped, leaned forward with a smile that was at once gracious and mischievous, and said, “You know, in all honesty, I have to admit that your research topic just doesn’t interest me that much.”

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14) Itami’s aversion to signage was related to me by one of his art directors.

