



**Imaging the Avant-Garde:
Taiwan's Film Experiments in the 1960s**

相像式前衛・台灣1960s的電影實驗

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Taiwan in the 1960s was a nation marked by a repressive political climate, a heavily restricted flow of information, and a mainstream film culture that was dominated by Taiyupian (Taiwanese-language cinema) and what came to be known as “healthy realist” melodramas. Nevertheless, young Taiwanese intellectuals, who had become aware of the Western avant-garde movement through writings and translations, were eager to align themselves with the innovations of their counterparts in the West. They formed for themselves a concept of what the “avant-garde” could look like and carried out their own experiments with film and theater.

This year's edition of the Taiwan International Documentary Festival featured a special series showcasing films from the 1960s by some of the most daring and creative artists in Taiwan. A large number of these experimental works have not been preserved, yet traces have been found and periodically studied, and gradually the 1960s has come to be known as an era of vanguard cultural activity in Taiwan. The TIDF curatorial team conducted an exhaustive search for all the films of that period. They reached out to the surviving artists (now all in their seventies or eighties), interviewed those in Hong Kong and Western art circuits who worked or were in contact with their Taiwanese counterparts, and pored through every issue of the Theatre Quarterly 劇場雜誌, the magazine that played a pivotal role in advocating the latest developments in the Western art world by dedicating more than 90% of its pages to translations of new European and American works. A rough sketch of the 1960s film experiments gradually took shape. In May, the TIDF presented this special series in Taipei, with some titles screening publicly for the first time since their completion half a century ago.

The TIDF team went the extra mile to search for evidence of lost films made in the 1960s, eventually putting together a filmography of 34 titles. These works collectively represent a sudden surge in creative energy and can be seen as a reflection of the unique zeitgeist of the 1960s. Moreover, the formal diversity of these works challenged the definition of the cinema, and also sketched out the rough edges of the generation's own sense of modern film. These five programs bring the fruits of the TIDF team's efforts to the United States for the first time! Program Director of the TIDF, Mr. Wood Lin, will be present to give pre-screening introductions.

This series has been curated by the Taiwan International Documentary Festival, with support from the Taiwan Film Institute, and is presented in collaboration with the Taipei Cultural Center in New York.



Lightbox
Film
Center



TIDF
台灣國際紀錄片影展
TAIWAN INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL



國家電影中心
Taiwan Film Institute



文化部
MINISTRY OF CULTURE

Taipei Cultural Center in New York

Program A: Richard Yao-chi Chen's Student Films, 1963-1966

單元 A：1963-66 陳耀圻 短片習作

Total running time: ca. 62 min

Born in Sichuan, China, in 1938, Richard Yao-chi Chen moved to Taiwan in 1945 where he studied architecture before relocating to the U.S. He attended the Chicago Art Institute and received his MA in film studies from UCLA in 1967, and then returned to Taiwan to embark on a successful filmmaking career in the Chinese-speaking world. This program features four films Chen made while studying at UCLA. *The Archer* 后羿 is a hand-drawn animation of the Chinese folktale "Houyi Shoots Down the Suns" 后羿射日. Through the Years 年去年來 touches on the theme of Westward expansion by combining facts with fiction. A film about three college students, *The Mountain* 上山 employs a modernist narrative to reflect young people's longing for freedom in the 1960s. The original copy of this short lay forgotten in a UCLA professor's garage for decades and was digitally restored by the Taiwan Film Institute in 2017. *Liu Pi-Chia* 劉必稼, a biographical documentary depicting the life of a veteran who joined tens of thousands of others to work on national infrastructure construction projects in the 1960s, is considered Taiwan's first cinéma vérité film.



The Archer 后羿

Richard Yao-chi Chen 陳耀圻
1963 | 5 min | 16mm-to-digital

All aspects of this film including the story, script, and character design were independently conceived. The juxtaposition of a child's narration with classic oriental folktale "Houyi Shoots Down the Suns" brings forth unexpected connotations. This film, along with *The Mountain* and *Liu Pichia*, were premiered at a 1967 screening hosted by Literature Quarterly 文學季刊.



Through the Years 年去年來

Richard Yao-chi Chen 陳耀圻
1966 | 11 min | 16mm-to-digital

It is said that when America began the Westward Expansion, every mile of train track laid down cost the life of a Chinese migrant worker; moreover, the military stood guard along the lines to keep the Indians away. Mixing fictional depictions with real-life documentation, the film shows trains racing past ramshackle forts and barren deserts as a waltz plays on, with the desolate scenery contrasting with the tourists' smiling faces.

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Total running time: ca. 62 min

The Mountain 上山

Richard Yao-chi Chen 陳耀圻

1966 | 19 min | 16mm-to-digital

In Chinese with English subtitles.

In his spare time when filming Liu Pi-chia, the director follows three art college students Huang Yong-song 黃永松, Mou Tun-fei 牟敦芾 and Huang Gui-rong 黃貴蓉 as they enjoy an excursion into the mountains in Hsinchu. The three talk about their artistic ideals and dreams, how only KMT party members were eligible for scholarships, and their views on the Vietnam War; the song "California Dreamin'" plays throughout, highlighting the dejection of that period.



Liu Pi-chia 劉必稼

Richard Yao-chi Chen 陳耀圻

1967 | 27 min | 16mm-to-digital

The director interviewed many people finally choosing Liu Pi-chia as the protagonist for this film. Narrated in English, the film opens with Liu Pi-chia introducing his own name, age, and hometown. He then explains his work and life at the dam building site from a first-person perspective. When the film was made, films about ordinary people were rare; this film was dubbed as the first *cinéma vérité* documentary film in Taiwan, and was selected for screening at the Flaherty Seminar in the US.



Program B: Experimental Shorts from the 1960s

單元 B：1960s短片集

Total running time: ca. 71 min

This program presents films by five key figures, including filmmaker Pai Ching-jui 白景瑞, painter Han Hsiang-ning 韓湘寧, photographers Chuang Ling 莊靈 and Chang Chao-tang 張照堂, and designer Long Sih-liang 龍思良. While the movement was short-lived these filmmakers went on to become well-established artists in their own disciplines. Pai, the first person from Taiwan to study film in Italy, built his reputation making classic melodramas and literary adaptations. Han, still active today, is a noted painter, while Chuang and Chang are two highly respected photographers in Taiwan, and Long created many memorable visual designs for films and books.

The works in this program were either made as silent films or suffered damage to their soundtracks. This screening will be accompanied by live musical performances by Jeff Zeigler, Sarah Schimeneck and C. Spencer Yeh.



A Morning in Taipei

台北之晨

Pai Ching-jui 白景瑞

1964 | 20 min | 35mm-to-digital

This is an early work by the director, who had just returned from studying in Italy. As dawn gradually breaks, we see the neon lights of the city being swallowed by the morning light, and the city of Taipei slowly awakes to a new day. The film survives only in a working copy lacking audio.



Today 今日開幕

Han Hsiang-ning 韓湘寧

1965 | 4 min | 8mm-to digital

On the sandy shore of Yehliu, a headless human figure is beached and beaten by the waves, flickering in and out of view. The figure takes on a variety of sculpture-like poses in the endless space where sea and sky seem to join as one.



Run 跑

Han Hsiang-ning 韓湘寧

1966 | 5 min | 8mm-to digital

On a morning in 1966, as requested by the director, artist Xi De-jin 席德進 ran around the Ren'ai Road Roundabout in Taipei, while an 8mm camera tagged along, layering each slow frame of film upon the next. The runner, wearing a striped outfit, keeps striding forward to some unknown finish line, his eyes constantly looking around; suddenly, a motorcycle swarm appears and the runner vanishes in the busy traffic.

Program B: Experimental Shorts from the 1960s

單元 B：1960s 短片集

Total running time: ca. 71 min



Life Continued 延

Chuang Ling 莊靈
1966 | 14 min |
16mm-to-digital

The camera invites the viewers along with a placid, light-feeling scene, as a pregnant woman goes about her day, bringing into view unhurried pedestrians, tricycles, a traditional market place, and a plain city still unencumbered by high-rises.

My New Born Baby 赤子

Chuang Ling 莊靈
1967 | 8 min | 16mm-to-digital

This film documents the first 18 months of the life of the director's eldest daughter. It follows the young baby's faltering footsteps, as she takes account of the wide world through her tiny body, and preserves the cherished moments of the family.

A soundtrack arranged by Richard Yao-chi Chen, the director featured in the first program of this series, and Frederic J. Foley, a Jesuit priest deeply involved in art events when he stayed in Taiwan in the 1960s, previously existed, but was damaged due to its age; only the video survives.

Modern Poetry Exhibition/ 1966

現代詩展/1966

Chang Chao-tang 張照堂
1966 | 12 min | 8mm-to-digital

Artists contributing to the 1966 Modern Poetry Exhibition included Huang Yong-song 黃永松, Huang Hua-cheng 黃華成, Chang Chao-tang 張照堂 and Long Sih-liang 龍思良; each chose their favorite modern poems and transformed them into imagery. Dispersed by the police, the exhibition relocated a couple of times and lasted only one afternoon. This film captures some of the exhibits and the young artists, a time capsule of an event that is seeing the light of day 52 years after it was created.

Getting Ready for the Festival 過節

Long Sih-liang 龍思良
1967 | 8 min | 8mm-to-digital

Fruits on sale, sharpening knives, getting groomed by a barber, a bit of sweat on the nape, fans and flies—in these freckled, disjointed montages of everyday life, we see a faint hint of an upcoming festival as the theatre troupe sound its drums; the children either sit and gaze, or clamber to see the lead actress. After the filmmaker passed away in 2012, this 8mm roll of film was discovered among his personal effects, and shown for the first time after 51 years.



Program C: Experimental Shorts from the 1960s

單元 C：1960s短片集

Total running time: ca. 90 min

This program includes five films by artists who were indirectly involved in the 1960s artistic experiments. The Theater Quarterly did not just serve as a medium bringing in latest news on the Western art world, but also functioned as a platform for artists to present their new creations. Macao-born, Hong Kong based film critic Law Kar 羅卡 and Hong Kong's renowned writer Xi Xi 西西 both had briefly served as editor of Theatre Quarterly in the 1960s and made experimental films at that time which are included in this program. In addition, Tom Davenport, an American independent filmmaker who spent years studying the Chinese language and culture in Taiwan, was commissioned by National Geographic to film there. This program includes his first documentary T'ai Chi Ch'uan in which he captured the philosopher Nan Huai-chin 南懷瑾 practicing Tai-chi at Taiwan's northeastern coast.

The last two shorts provide an indirect view of the artistic achievements of Huang Hua-cheng 黃華成, a pivotal figure who co-founded Theater Quarterly and spearheaded the 1960s' experimental movement in theater, film, and visual art. As none of Huang's films have survived, the video documentation of the 1994 seminar "Theater Quarterly and I" 「劇場與我」座談會, in which Huang played his 1967 experimental work Experiment 002 in the original 8mm format, allows us to have a peek of his original work, whereas The Prophet is a video remake of Huang's first attempt in experimental theater.



Routine 全線

Law Kar 羅卡

1969 | 19 min | 16mm-to-digital

In 1968 Chuang Ling 莊靈, two of whose shorts are included in this series, visited Hong Kong and brought with him two 16mm cameras. One of them was an old Bell & Howell; it was given to Law Kar, who made several films with it. This film documents a short trip from Star Ferry's taxi stand to the office of Chinese Student Weekly 中國學生周報 in Kowloon Tong. It shows the street scenes of Hong Kong in 1968 and the state of mind of the young filmmaker after the 1967 Riot. The poster of the Amateur Films Exhibition shown at the end of the film was designed by Huang Hua-cheng and featured a photograph by Chang Chao-tang.



The Milky Way 銀河系

Xi Xi 西西

1968 | 2 min | 16mm-to-DigiBeta

Renowned writer Xi Xi was the editor of the ninth issue of Theatre Quarterly. Having an elder brother who worked at a television news station, she had access to a large amount of discarded tape. Piecing these images and sounds of celebrities and even the Pope together, this collage work serves as a reworked document of the era. The essay Camera Eyes 開麥拉眼 in her A Book of the Eyes and Ears 耳目書 compiles her views on film from 1967 to 1968.

Program C: Experimental Shorts from the 1960s

單元 C：1960s短片集

Total running time: ca. 90 min



T'ai Chi Ch'uan 太極拳

Tom Davenport
1969 | 10 min | 16mm-to-digital

During the 1960s, Davenport was commissioned by National Geographic to film in Taiwan and had broad contact with many figures in Taiwan's cultural circuit. In his first documentary, he captured the philosopher Nan Huai-chin practicing Tai-chi at Taiwan's northeastern coast. Shot with a 16mm camera, the film features sound created by composer Tom Johnson, using white noise to mimic the sound of waves and sectioned by castanets and wind chimes. Back then, harbors, forts, and hillsides were all "sensitive regions" where still and video photography were banned. According to the director, the film was completed after Nan Huai-chin pulled some strings with his military acquaintances.



The Prophet 先知

Su Yu-hsien 蘇育賢
2016 | 20 min | DCP.
In Chinese with English subtitles.

This film was originally created as a two-channel video installation, but is presented here as single-channel video. The Prophet was a play originally written by Huang Hua-cheng. The script centers on the dialogue between a couple sitting in the audience, facing an empty stage with only lighting and movement of the curtains. When this piece was first staged in 1965, director Richard Yao-chi Chen reworked it by keeping the actors on stage; hence the play Huang envisioned was never materialized. 51 years later, artist Su Yu-hsien invited the original cast back to the same site to recreate the play the way Huang desired.



EXPERIMENT 002 實驗002

Huang Hua-cheng 黃華成
1994 video documentation | 39 min |
VHS-to-digital

In 1994 the Chinese Taipei Film Archive (now Taiwan Film Institute) held a seminar titled "Theatre Quarterly and I," during which Huang Hua-cheng brought his 8mm film reel of Experiment 002 to recreate how this film was premiered in 1967: the film was projected onto six screens, with the projector placed on a wobbling helmet, and breathing sounds were added while the film was playing. This is a recording of the seminar. Huang passed away in 1996 in Taipei and his early films have all been lost.

Program D: I Didn't Dare to Tell You

單元 D：不敢跟你講

Total running time: ca. 97 min



The Mountain 上山

Richard Yao-chi Chen 陳耀圻

1966 | 19 min | 16mm-to-digital

In Chinese with English subtitles.

In his spare time when filming Liu Pi-chia, the director follows three art college students Huang Yong-song, Mou Tun-fei 牟敦芾 and Huang Gui-rong 黃貴蓉 as they enjoy an excursion into the mountains in Hsinchu. The three talk about their artistic ideals and dreams, how only KMT party members were eligible for scholarships, and their views on the Vietnam War; the song "California Dreamin'" plays throughout, highlighting the dejection of that period.



I Didn't Dare to Tell You 不敢跟你講

Mou Tun-fei 牟敦芾

1969 | 78 min | 35mm-to-digital

In Chinese with English subtitles.

Born in China in 1941, Mou Tun-fei moved to Taiwan in 1949. He declared that cinema would be his lifework when he was still an art college student. I Didn't Dare to Tell You and The End of the Track, both included in this series, are the only two feature films he made in Taiwan and are among the nation's first independent titles. Both films were not released for unknown reasons, though rumor has it that the realistic depiction of the stifling society in I Didn't Dare to Tell You and the hint of homosexuality in The End of the

Track could be the causes. Discouraged by the setback, Mou spent the following years travelling in Europe and South America before working in Hong Kong for Shaw Brothers Pictures 邵氏電影. He then became known for making bloody, gory films.

In this film, a primary school student secretly works a night job to pay off his father's gambling debts, and as a result constantly dozes off during classes in the day. When the teacher investigates, a series of family disputes ensue.

Only a small number of people saw the film at private screenings upon its completion, still, its realistic style spurred discussion among viewers. One reel of the film's original 35mm copy is lost, and this only available complete copy has an abrupt, inconsistent ending that's considered a modification by the government to serve as propaganda. This is Mou's first film after graduating from college. The script was written by Huang Gui-rong; some say it was adapted from the children's novel Cuore (Heart) by Edmondo de Amicis.

Program E: The End of the Track

單元 E：跑道終點

Total running time: ca. 91 min



The End of the Track 跑道終點

Mou Tun-fei 牟敦芾

1970 | 91 min | 35mm-to-digital

In Chinese with English subtitles.

Tong and Yong-sheng are inseparable playmates, but when Yong-sheng dies in a training accident with Tong present, Tong feels heartbroken and guilt-ridden. Since both families fail to understand him, and burdened by solitude after losing his best friend, Tong falls into a downward spiral. At the time, this film was banned due to its homosexual overtones. Some felt that certain segments drew comparison with the short story *The Noodle Stall* 麵攤 by Chen Ying-zhen 陳映真, a key figure of Taiwan's 1960s literary movement who was imprisoned twice for "subversive activity."

Screening Schedule

Lightbox Film Center

3701 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

(215) 895-6590, lightboxfilmcenter.org

Wed., **Oct. 17** 7:00pm Program **A + B**
(Program B with live score performance
by Jeff Zeigler and Sarah Schimeneck)

Thu., **Oct. 18** 7:00pm Program **D**

Fri., **Oct. 19** 6:00pm Program **C**

Fri., **Oct. 19** 8:00pm Program **E**

Anthology Film Archives

32 Second Avenue New York, NY 10003

(212) 505-5181, anthologyfilmarchives.org

Fri., **Oct. 19** 7:45pm Program **A**

Sat., **Oct. 20** 5:30pm Program **C**

Sat., **Oct. 20** 8:00pm Program **D**

Sun., **Oct. 21** 5:15pm Program **E**

Sun., **Oct. 21** 8:00pm Program **B**
(with live musical performance by C. Spencer Yeh)