Oyster Girl (蚵女, *Ke nü*, 1963)

Pei-yin Lin

dir. Hsing Lee, Chia Lee; prod. Henry Kung; screenplay Chi-pin Chao, Chngbo Liu; photography Hui-ying Hua; music Ming-tao Lu. 35mm, color, 106 mins. Central Motion Picture Company, distrib. Central Motion Picture Company.

Oyster Girl is the earliest postwar color »healthy realism« film from Taiwan, produced by the state-owned Central Motion Picture Company (CMPC). In 1963, the CMPC director Henry Kung started to promote this genre that projects an ideal version of Taiwan in line with the »New Life Movement« that the Nationalist Party (KMT) inaugurated in 1934. The New Life Movement was guided by Confucian philosophy, aiming to cultivate moral virtues such as propriety, justice, and honesty. Although Kung claimed the inspiration was from Italy's postwar neorealist films, the CMPC's »healthy realism« was actually, and perhaps also ironically, closer to Soviet socialist realism, in which positive heroes and bright plotlines are prerequisites so that the films are instructive and help reinforce the ruling party's stability. Thus, healthy realism is a contextually specific and ideologically embedded genre, expected to consolidate the nascent KMT's political legitimacy in Taiwan. As this type of film often contains melodramatic elements, such as familial love and romance, scholars have referred to it as »melodramatic realism« (Berry 76) or a »film movement inclusive of various genres« (Hong 75).

Hsing Lee's collaboration with the CMPC on its »healthy realism« project was not coincidental. In 1958, Lee had already directed the popular Taiwanese-dialect comedy film *Brother Wang and Brother Liu Tour Taiwan*, regarded by some as a Taiwanese version of Laurel and Hardy films. Lee established his own production company in 1961 and made the acclaimed film *Our Neighbour* (1963), which inspired Henry Kung to advocate

»healthy realism« focusing on the brightness of life. *Oyster Girl*, co-directed by Hsing Lee and Chia Lee, and *Beautiful Duckling* (1965), which Hsing Lee directed alone, are both representative works, sanguinely exploring quotidian life in Taiwan's countryside. The somewhat negative portrayal of poor émigré mainlanders living in a ghetto in *Our Neighbour* is replaced in *Oyster Girl* by hopefulness conveyed through its portrayal of the KMT regime's impressive modernization in Taiwan. The fishermen association's success in the oyster's varietal improvement and the elected township mayor's eagerness to offer help are both salient examples. As for *Beautiful Duckling*, the film highlights the diligence and good nature of a duck-raising farmer and his adopted daughter, despite their adversity.

After *Oyster Girl*, Hsing Lee directed *Four Loves* (1964) and *My Silent Wife* (1965). Both melodramatic films were adapted from the tear-jerking stories by the popular romance novelist Qiong Yao and contain »healthy« messages. The former demonstrates that education is important for the disabled, which sat well with the KMT's modernization blueprint. Lee made his third Qiong Yao film, *Where the Seagull Flies* (1974), before refocusing on realist topics in the late 1970s. *He Never Gives Up* (1978), *The Story of a Small Town* (1979), and *Good Morning, Taipei* (1980) led him to win the Golden Horse Award for Best Feature Film, considered the Taiwanese Oscar, for three consecutive years, unprecedented in the history of Taiwanese film.

Thus far, scholars have tended to focus on state intervention in Taiwan's film industry (Liu), or the concept of realism in »healthy realism« films (Chen). Although a few scholars have paid attention to the co-existence of this specific kind of realism with sentimental spectacles (Berry and Farquhar; Chiang; Lin) and remind us to treat »healthy realism« as neither straightforwardly propagandistic nor entirely commercially oriented, the mixture of both elements in Hsing Lee's *Oyster Girl* warrants closer scrutiny, particularly because of the tension between its »healthiness«—the success of government-led modernization—and the melodramatic elements that center on its female characters.

Set against the backdrop of a Taiwanese fishing village, the melodramatic plot of *Oyster Girl* primarily revolves around the romantic love between the heroine, Ah-lan (played by Mo-chou Wang), and her impoverished fisherman boyfriend, Jinshui (Chia-chi Wu). Ah-lan works hard as an oyster girl to support her alcoholic father and young brother. She hopes to marry Jinshui, but Jinshui is seldom around, as he works on the fishing boat aspiring to save money before proposing to Ah-lan. Ah-huo is interested in Ah-lan, and this irritates his girlfriend, Ah-chu, who picks a fight on the oyster farm with Ah-lan. Jinshui and Ah-lan plan their marriage, but Ah-lan's father demands a huge dowry payment. In order to raise the money, Jinshui has no alternative but to leave for deep sea fishing. Ah-lan soon finds herself pregnant with Jinshui's child and is sent to stay with the aunt of her friend Ah-juan in another village, in order to avoid gossip about her extramarital pregnancy. One day, Ah-huo almost sexually assaults Ah-lan. Fortunately, Ah-chu appears and rescues Ah-lan, foreshadowing the two girls' reconciliation. Later, Ah-lan encounters a difficult childbirth, but Jinshui returns in time and donates blood to save her. The film culminates buoyantly, with the marriage of Ah-lan and Jinshui, the new village head establishing a co-op, and Ah-lan joining other oyster girls on the sea to celebrate their life through shared song.

While *Oyster Girl*'s uplifting ending makes it a perfect »healthy realism« film, its co-optation of melodramatic elements, and their transposition into the context of Tai-

wan's rural modernization, provides food for thought. Savvy audiences would detect that, linguistically, the film is hardly a »realist« one, as the main characters—including the oyster girls and other villagers—speak Mandarin, whereas they would in reality speak Taiwanese dialect. This unmasks the irony of the term »healthy realism,« as a film that is overly optimistic is unlikely to be real. *Oyster Girl*, in this regard, presents a peculiar case of melodrama. Its *melos*, the use of sound, lends weight to the KMT's language policy—in which Mandarin is the only officially sanctioned »national« language—rather than to the film's sentimentality. The voice-over and the film's theme song further demonstrate that the use of sound in *Oyster Girl* corresponds seamlessly to state ideology. The voice-over, narrated by a male voice in standard Mandarin, at the beginning links Ah-lan's image to the oyster. It suggests that Ah-lan's disposition is as strong as oyster shell, and her tender and pure heart is like oyster meat. The theme song, presented sometimes as a chorus and sometimes in the form of a symphony, is always accompanied by impressive scenes showing myriad oyster boats in long or panoramic shots with farmers happy about their harvests.

Oyster Girl's »healthiness« is not based solely on the progress made by the local government. It is also associated with the gender-specific moral codes. The heroine, Ah-lan, for instance, is expected to be a loyal daughter, a caring sister, a diligent oyster girl, and, most importantly, a chaste young lady. This is enhanced in the film by minimizing Ah-lan and Jinshui's physical interactions with each other and replacing them instead with largely symbolic scenes. Ah-lan and Jinshui's romance is signified by their chasing each other on the beach, and their mutual passion is represented by the seaside bonfire and their smirks in their own room after spending a night together. When Ah-lan finds herself pregnant, her father, a figure of patriarchal order, scolds her. Ah-lan's shame is shown through close-ups of her face. The compassionate Ah-juan suggests Ah-lan should go to another village to stay away from the gossip, further confirming that Ah-lan's pregnancy is »disgraceful« and must be contained.

Paradoxically, throughout the film, Dr. Su seems to be the most supportive of Ah-lan, as he convinces her to keep her child if she loves Jinshui. Dr. Su's prioritization of love can be understood as a triumph of feeling over moral norms. However, he later becomes the township's mayor, devoted to helping the village economy boom, and is also the person who resolves Ah-lan's complicated childbirth. This suggests his advice for Ah-lan is not necessarily because he truly believes in love. Rather, his pro-life and progress-oriented outlook can be interpreted as an example of the state's medical and economic modernization. Two additional examples further demonstrate how the melodramatic elements, such as personal desire, are suppressed for the sake of the film's »healthiness.« One is the relationship between Ah-juan and Guo Mingshun, a technician in the local fishing association. In this relationship, amorous feelings are diluted as Ah-juan is depicted as an admirer of Guo, who strives to improve oyster breeding and increase production. The other is detectable in the rivalry between Ah-lan and Ah-chu, which turns into a gang fight among the oyster girls on the farm. It ends with the girls being taken to the local health station for treatment. In all, the women-related melodramatic scenarios—including the three romances, Ah-lan's unexpected pregnancy, and Ah-lan and Ah-chu as love rivals—are either suppressed by the patriarchal order or public gossip or tinted with the KMT's technological and medical advances in postwar Taiwan. If we take the primary female protagonist, Ah-lan, as the epitome of a state-endorsed regime of health, then the happy ending in which she

gives birth and marries Jinshui indicates a self-content laboring life and bright prospects for the village. All in all, *Oyster Girl* is a melodramatic »healthy realism« film, with its »healthiness« lying most centrally in its thematic optimism and use of *melos*: oyster girls' singing, voice-over, and dialogue in Mandarin Chinese. Melodramatic and healthy elements are not incompatible, but the former are often curtailed and appropriated into making the film's gendered vision of a state-orchestrated modernization.

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