

**Monogamorphous Desires, Faltering Forms: Culture, Content, and Style in Chen Kuo-fu's  
"Zhenghun qishi" (The Personals [Solicitation Seeking Marriage])** {Taiwan 1998}

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*...modern couples are desperately seeking a new formula that will tell them  
how to love...This search gives rise to all sorts of caricatured situations...*

*--Paul Verhaeghe--*

**SYNOPSIS & INTRODUCTION**

Taiwan film critic Chen Kuo-fu directs this his fourth film, from the script he co-wrote with Chin Shih-chieh (based on a popular stage play, itself based on a popular novel by Chen Yuhui). It is the story of Du Jiazhen (René Liu), a young ophthalmologist who advertises for a husband in the newspaper personals [under the name "Ms. Wu"]. Much of the film takes the form of a series of vignettes --short, frequently very humorous scenes, presenting Du's interviews with the laughable characters who seek her hand. However, over the course of the film it becomes evident that Du is somewhat ambivalent about her search for a spouse. Though advertising her desire for permanent male companionship, it appears that she's actually engaged in a project to get over her last failed relationship --an affair with a married man who now refuses to so much as return her phone calls. In the long late-night messages she leaves on this former lover's answering machine, Du discusses their relationship, reflects on the types of men she's been meeting through her ad, and ponders what she is really looking for. Eventually, we discover that she still loves this man, although she is angry and emotionally scarred by his abandonment of her. She becomes especially distraught when discussing the anger and pain caused by his unexplained absence when she had to make the difficult decision to abort their illegitimate child.

In this essay, I wish to discuss the central formal contrast of this film, between the comical-vignette interviews and the focus on the most traumatic period in the protagonist's life. I will briefly explore many issues that arise from or are related to this contradiction, from specific characteristics of the film's form and content, through characterization, and into larger issues concerning contemporary Taiwan society (namely, issues of gender and sexuality). I will

conclude with some discussion of this film as part of an emergent genre in Taiwan filmmaking of the last five or so years. Owing to the time constraint, I will leave aside the well-known issues surrounding the innovative and extremely successful marketing of this film (see Ru-Shou Robert Chen 1999, and Huang Maochang 1999 for detailed discussions).

## ANALYSIS

### FORM & CONTENT

Formally, one notable and recurring feature of the “The Personals” is the use of abrupt cuts, from shot to shot or from scene to scene, often featuring close-ups of the various interviewees. These cuts serve the dual function of compressing time --so that a significant number and variety of respondents can be presented-- and of getting to the essence of each interview, the key moments when that particular man’s character (flaw) is revealed. There is a second, even more notable aspect of the framing shots of the interviewees: labels appear in the corner of the screen, keeping the audience apprised of the name, age, and occupation of each.<sup>1</sup> The documentary-styled realism of this technique is manipulated to humorous ends, for the comical idiosyncrasies of these men frequently stand in stark contrast to their outward appearance and stated credentials. This technique allows for a great deal of distance between viewers and characters, encouraging dispassionate observation of the hilarious entourage of buffoons who come to woo Du in the public space of an upscale coffee shop. A humorous view of these interviews is further encouraged by the upbeat musical soundtrack (featuring, for example, quasi Latin-style ‘tropical’ music [complete with bird calls], short peppy synthesizer riffs, punctuating horn blasts, big-band music, and variations on a choral rip-off of the Tokens’ “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”). Granted, this parade of losers, neurotics, liars, and others (a pimp, a schizoid mama’s boy, an actor in full disguise, an aging tightwad, a middle-school student, etc.) provides some of the best humor to be found outside of the formulaic slapstick comedies familiar to Taiwan and Hong Kong moviegoers. However, such humorous objectivity is totally at odds with the presentation of the other events in the film. The comedic scenes clash awkwardly against the privacy and intimacy of the scenes revealing Du’s emotional suffering. The latter scenes, which provide details of the traumatic relationship that still haunts the melancholic Du, are introduced gradually over the course of the film, and feel largely contrived. They are formally distinguished

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<sup>1</sup> These shots are frequently close-ups, frontal torso or head shots of the men sitting at the table across from Du.

from the more comical scenes through the deployment of slowly panning long shots, Du's introspective commentary, and the absence of lighthearted music. In these scenes Du is either seeking advice from her former university psychology instructor or pouring out her heart into the answering machine of her ex-lover. The most intimate scenes (shot in Du's apartment, often in her bedroom) are unmediated by labels and contain somber emotional outpourings in which Du is presented to the audience as a sensitive, deeply wounded, highly sympathetic character. Du's very personal discussions with her former professor are sharply contrasted to the interviews as well, not only by her own confessional frankness but also when he reveals that he is a gay man who has chosen [straight] marriage and family life as a less complicated alternative to the pain and complications of coming out in Taiwan. Thus, the serious presentation of Du's emotional life and her personal relationships stands in striking contrast to the comical dialogues between her and the men she interviews at the coffee shop.

### **THROUGH-LINE [?]**

Is there a through-line to the events in this film, some way of adequately accounting for the above-noted discrepancies in both form and content? Perhaps the introduction of sobering personal details and psychological wounds might be an attempt to add emotional counterpoint to the protagonist's farcical interviews with total strangers. Formally, the private interludes add narrative detail to this assorted collection of humorous vignettes filmed in public spaces. In other words, the gradual revelation of Du Jiazhen's recent personal history and private suffering provides dramatic content, detail, emotional depth, and a sense of narrative closure to what would otherwise be the amusing portrayal of an enigmatically desperate and lonely woman. Nevertheless, the effect imparted by this contrast is that of a sentimental, almost melodramatic plot having been forcibly woven --or knotted-- into the narrative of a film that is anything but serious, especially during much of the first hour.<sup>2</sup>

### **CHARACTERIZATION**

Aside from this formal clumsiness, the content of the film simplistically implies that there may not be a single straight man in Taipei worth marrying, or even dating at all. In this respect,

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<sup>2</sup> Li Yongquan criticizes Chen Kuo-fu's 1993 film "Zhiyao wei ni huo yitian" on the basis of similar formal inconsistencies (1998: 100). Kraicer faults "The Personals" for scenes which don't "mesh" with the rest.

“The Personals”’s representation of Taipei men is little more than a conglomeration of one-dimensional stereotypes and social misfits.<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably (for this viewer at least), Du Jiazhen’s character --despite her apparently ‘modern’ attributes-- seems to be modeled on a traditional stereotype. Her behavior resembles that of the demure, courteous, genteel, sensitive young women found, for example, in some butterfly fiction (historically updated, of course, to include her economic independence and medical degree). Despite her manifestation of “progressive” features, Du is still a fairly typical, familiar object of male heterosexual desire, neither stepping beyond the bounds of (feminine) social propriety nor expressing a threatening degree of desire, sexual experience, or autonomy. For instance, when one of her potential suitors, a pimp, tries to persuade her to become one of his “high-class” hookers, she gets teary eyed and politely criticizes his exploitation of women, then even asks what it was in *her* demeanor that emboldened him to speak with such effrontery. In another instance, after she impulsively has sex with the most “normal” of her suitors,<sup>4</sup> she is immediately overcome with guilt and shame, sobbing in the bathroom, as the dejected young man quietly dresses and leaves.

Taking into consideration the characterization of Du Jiazhen, one interesting point to discuss is whether or not she represents a patriarchal desire for [the return to] a traditional type of gender ideal. This question is particularly relevant in light of the director’s appearance in Olivier Assayas’s 1997 biographical documentary “Cinéma de notre temps: Hou Hsiao-hsien.” In this documentary, Chen Kuo-fu emotionally testifies his unqualified admiration and praise for his friend Hou and his films. Judging from the evidence in “The Personals,” Chen’s adulation might very well include Hou’s stated nostalgia for a time in his culture when “men were strong, virile, and competitive...fighting for the lead position” and Hou’s lamenting that in the future “women are going to be stronger than men.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The film’s portrayal of Taipei men is quite reminiscent of the characterization of African-American men in the Hollywood film “Waiting to Exhale.” In addition to their one-dimensional, simplistic representation of the pathetic pool of available single men, another similarity shared by the two films is seen in the disparity between their male and female characters; the women in both films are young (mostly 30-something), attractive, professional, mature, financially independent, highly educated, and desperately seeking heterosexual, monogamous relationships.

<sup>4</sup> A handsome, sensitive, honest ex-con who took the fall for a family member, played by Chen Zhaorong.

<sup>5</sup> Hou uses the terms “xiong” and “ci” to designate gender/sex in his evolutionary fantasy. For examples of the cinematic praxis of his rigid gender binarism, see Hou’s “Ximeng rensheng” (Puppetmaster) and “Nanguo zaijian, nanguo” (Goodbye South, Goodbye).

On the other hand, Du Jiazhen's character in "The Personals" could be interpreted as the deliberate attempt to question the contemporary validity of traditional gender stereotypes. The spectacle of a fairly conservative, reticent, "old-school" young woman trying to arrange her own marriage through the very 1990s phenomenon of personal ads, and ultimately confronted with a crop of weasels, perverts, skinflints, etc., could be intentionally ironic. In other words, "The Personals" may be showing us that a certain type of stereotypical gender role in Taiwan culture is no longer socially viable in the late 1990s, that it is historically residual (using Raymond Williams's term<sup>6</sup>). This reading is likely against the grain, I'll admit, since the casting and portrayal of Du Jiazhen seems altogether sympathetic. One can contrast her, for instance, to the far more confident, outgoing, and savvy cross-dressing lesbian character who arranges an interview with Du. Though given some relatively subversive dialogue with respect to gender norms, this character is presented as yet another oddball or pervert, a departure from a nostalgically longed for heterosexual feminine standard.<sup>7</sup>

### **CONTEXT: I. THE HETERONORMATIVE RE-INSCRIBES ITSELF**

There is some slight mockery of the above-discussed trend towards sexual neo-conservatism in Chen Kuo-fu's film.<sup>8</sup> Ostensibly, the viewer is presented with a great diversity of male characters (and one transgendered character) who respond to a clearly and specifically-worded personal advertisement from a woman seeking heterosexual monogamy. However, what for Du Jiazhen is a straightforward request for a permanent male partner in a marital relationship,<sup>9</sup> is for many of the other characters an open-ended rhetorical form. Into this form they freely read their own desires, desires which do not fit the bill (the foot fetishist, the guy who hopes to make a porn film, the guy who wants free sex, the pimp, the cross-dressing lesbian, etc.). This would seem to imply that Du Jiazhen's request appeals to a that is no longer authoritative, a discourse that can't guarantee the promise of personal fulfillment and social sanctification that it could in the past. As far as the dominant cultural discourse [heterosexual monogamy, e.g.] is concerned, once a significant number of subjects begin to manipulate or disregard the central social codes and

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<sup>6</sup> Williams distinguishes between the contending "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" ideological forces that make up the field of cultural production (1977: 121-127).

<sup>7</sup> Contrast this to René Liu's superb, psychologically complex portrayal of a young lesbian in Lin Zhengsheng's "Meili zai changege."

<sup>8</sup> Li Yongquan finds a similar strain of "compromising conservatism" to be the "fatal flaw" in Chen Kuo-fu's 1989 "Guozhong nüsheng" (1998: 91).

constructs of that discourse, then the discourse is experiencing a crisis.<sup>10</sup> It is no longer capable of socializing subjects within the demands of those codes and constructs. Nevertheless, in the case of “The Personals,” the laughable portrayal of the subjects who violate the norm makes mockery of the film’s potential reappraisal of traditional social mores, and expresses a longing for some ‘decent, normal’ guys to complement this normal gal –to read her (advertisement) correctly and respond in kind.<sup>11</sup> Here, the well-known postmodern ludic/ironic mode, rather than playing with or subverting the discourse of tradition, feeds a nostalgic longing for a return to the sexual certainties of old. To summarize, the late 1990s film “The Personals” *and* the popular social phenomenon of written personal ads in Taiwan (and U.S.) newspapers may indicate a rupture in the discourse of heterosexual monogamy, a historical moment when the discourse of traditional gender behaviors and sexual relations appears to be breaking down. Nevertheless, within that breach, we can simultaneously witness a longing for the lost sense of continuity and wholeness, and a subsequent new momentum toward the assimilation of alternative subjectivities and interpersonal relationships, within the parameters of the disrupted discourse. This contradictory process indicates the powerful inertia of established social structures and mores.<sup>12</sup>

This aspect of Chen Kuo-fu’s film should also be discussed in terms of a possible re-evaluation of certain contemporary theoretical concepts and themes. As just noted, “The Personals” demonstrates how the discourse of tradition, following a sort of market logic, is expanding to embrace the post-modern proliferation of sexualities and genders --the “multiple subject positions” so widely celebrated by some theorists. Taking the case of personal ads as an example, witness how, regardless of the gender and/or sexual preference of the individual placing the ad, the majority of these ads are framed within the familiar discourse of monogamy: desire for a permanent, single, emotional and sexual “soul-mate,” based on the (Christian/Confucian) model

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<sup>9</sup> Please refer to [Index A](#).

<sup>10</sup> Such a critical breakdown in a dominant discourse could also be described as signaling a change in ‘epistemes,’ in Foucauldian terms.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Verhaeghe in his latest book, discusses in Freudian and Lacanian terms this issue of the breakdown of traditional, clearly defined psychosexual discourses in [Western] culture. Among innumerable fascinating insights, he notes “Today, nothing means what it once meant. The perception of the cultural earthquake can be very different, ranging from an anxious plea for the return of law and order to a jubilant expectation of a new society.” One of the core conflicts in this earthquake is centered around the fact that today “the very idea of a couple has, to put it mildly, become problematic” (1999: 1, 2).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the breakdown of traditional gender and sexual codes in 1990s Taiwan, see Chen Ruxiu 1995: 36-54.

of the nuclear/extended family. People who deliberately misread the ad, who express desires outside the normalizing discourse, who entertain alternative possibilities, are represented as “abnormal,” “perverted,” etc.<sup>13</sup>

This particular aspect of the film also satirically challenges the current popular version of diversity politics. We can read it as an allegory for the process in which any emergent or “marginal” type of sexuality or gender role, once it appears/“comes out,” is subsequently seduced by the possibility of gaining “a place at the table,” becoming part of “the conversation,” having its “diversity” “celebrated.” What that seduction disguises is the fact that such acceptance is gained at the cost of bolstering or even becoming part of the ever-expanding, long-established and always-already validated cultural norm. The standard forms, rituals, myths, performance, dress, body types, roles, genders, sexual acts, etc. of heterosexuality and monogamy manage to incorporate and colonize any alternative to established forms and norms.

Finally, I would like to relate the preceding discussion of the film’s formal contradiction to some possible film trends that may help us contextualize and clarify this contradiction.

## **CONTEXT: II. TRENDS /COMPARISONS**

At one point in his historical survey of Taiwan cinema, Ru-Shou Robert Chen discusses the post “City of Sadness” (1989) years, when Taiwanese audience interest reached a saturation point, having seen enough “childhood stories” and films “remind[ing] people of Taiwan’s past” (Zhang 1998: 61).<sup>14</sup> It is in this context that that Wu Nienzhen’s “Buddha Bless America” (Taiping tianguo 1996) is discussed as a salutary new type of historical film in Taiwan, as a film that “opened up a new possibility: *critical reflection with laughter*” (ibid: 59, emphasis added). Chen goes on to note how Chen Yuxun’s “Tropical Fish” (Redai yu 1995<sup>15</sup>), “brought forth rare laughter from the Taiwanese audience,” but that the “underlying message of *Tropical Fish* [which goes unnamed] was intended for students who have suffered under the strict entrance examination system” (ibid: 61). One aspect of “Tropical Fish” that is glossed over when we treat it as a simple comedy is the fate of the character Ah Juan. Ah Juan is a depressed young girl who serves her

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<sup>13</sup> Many personals sections in newspapers even codify and prioritize the ads according to types, in such a way that heterosexual, monogamous desires occupy a place of privilege and sense of propriety.

<sup>14</sup> More specifically, he notes that “City of Sadness” was released sometime after this saturation of nostalgia films (and family sagas) had already begun to bore [potential] audiences, a trend which he sees as having begun around 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Written and directed by Chen Yuxun.

family through manual labor and domestic servitude. Her family has forced her to quit her studies, take a factory job in Gaoxiong, and then act as household servant for her mentally incompetent brothers. She was further traumatized in Gaoxiong, we learn, when her new boyfriend and his friend together raped her. As with “The Personals,” “Tropical Fish” awkwardly places a sexually traumatized and emotionally scarred, depressed young woman amidst a largely male crowd of sympathetically-portrayed, mostly kind-hearted, ludicrous buffoons (reluctant first-time kidnapers in this instance). Again, this incongruous combination strikes me as irreconcilable, as a formal inconsistency that throws the whole film into generic confusion. What is the underlying cultural appeal for weaving the narrative of a sexually and emotionally scarred young woman into a storyline dominated by comical male characters? The answer[s] to this question will undoubtedly be long and complicated, but the short, generalized answer might be as follows: certain areas of the Taiwanese [male] cultural unconscious, as represented in these popular films, are deeply conflicted when it comes to imagining complex, realistic women [characters] and to finding adequate ways of representing women’s social, sexual, and economic lives, without resorting to idealization (especially with respect to mothering and the domestic sphere), reductive sexualization, and/or casting them against a ludicrously improbable world [of male incompetence]. I do not have time or space to pursue this issue in the present format, but I hope this might provoke some discussion.

I would like to conclude this part of my discussion by adding the names of a few recent films to this general *critical reflection with laughter* trend: “Guojiang” (dir. Chen Yiwen: 1999/2000?), and perhaps “Majiang,”<sup>16</sup> (dir. Yang Dechang: 1996), which Ru-Shou Robert Chen labels “a satirical account of human relationships in modern Taipei,” noting other film critics’ comparisons of the film to Woody Allen’s “Manhattan” (Zhang 1998: 60).

Another interesting comparison can be drawn between “The Personals” and two other 1990s Taiwan films: Tsai Ming-liang’s “Aiqing wansui,” and An Lee’s “Yinshi nannü.” All three films are largely shot against background settings that prominently feature the material prosperity of Taipei/Taiwan. Coincidentally, all three films also share the actor Chen Chao-Rong, who

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<sup>16</sup> Anyone who has seen this film cannot forget shock of the first gang rape scene (and the second rather deserved reprisal), the double suicide, and the final murder, none of which smack of the satirical or Allenesque. In my own reading, Yang’s movie actually constitutes a powerful qualification to the what these aforementioned films may

stands for heterosexual male virility in each. While Li's film is an unabashed celebration of capitalism, patriarchy, monogamy, and reproduction, and Tsai's film probes the economic, emotional, sexual conflicts and suffering that exist within this prosperity, Chen's film contains little if any social critique of the affluent society it represents. "The Personals" gingerly touches on this issue of emotional and sexual suffering in a materialistic and affluent society, but then avoids asking if these problems signal the demand for --among other things-- new social, gender, and sexual constructs.

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imply about the Taiwanese cultural unconscious, as does Tsai Ming-liang's "Aiqing wansui," although the latter falls outside the scope of the generic trend I am discussing.

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