

## Document Citation

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**Train in vain:** Hou Hsiao-hsien's reputation continues to rest on a sequence of rarely seen films, of which *Dust in the Wind* is arguably the best.

## Dusted off

*Two classics of '80s Taiwanese cinema resurface.* **By Alvin Lu**

**B**ETWEEN ACTION schlock and art-house exotica sits a vast middle ground of quality Chinese cinema — but you'd hardly know it in the United States. All those movies seem to do now is suck up time on channels that have otherwise exhausted their supplies of programming; only occasionally do they make a haunting appearance on the big screen. This week a couple of Taiwanese films from the mid-'80s — the high period of the three simultaneous Chinese new waves — have washed up like lost letters of distress on the Fine Arts Cinema's increasingly curious calendar.

One of those, *Dust in the Wind*, comes from Hou Hsiao-hsien, whose austere reputation abroad almost makes us forget that at least once he was actually a popular filmmaker in Taiwan (even as he now attempts to crack the pop charts with his singing prowess). He once claimed in an interview that he got into filmmaking for the "fame and money"; things haven't quite worked out that way. Instead he's become one of the most artistically revered but least watched filmmakers of international repute. The recent, phenomenal success in France of his *Flowers of Shanghai* (which just played the international film festival here) and the possibility of its being the first of his films to be widely distributed in the United States might change that.

Meanwhile, Hou's reputation continues to rest on a sequence of films he made in the mid-'80s. *Dust in the Wind* is arguably the best of them, though it's hard to draw lines. *Daughter of the Nile*, a critical and commercial failure structured around a popu-

lar girls' manga, might be his most interesting, but, a city film, it's atypical, while *Dust* is consummate. Its opening POV shot of a train emerging from a tunnel into the lush Taiwanese countryside may as well be the signature image of the new Chinese cinema.

All the trademarks ensue — motionless camera, long takes, lack of close-ups, decentered framing, naturalistic acting, poetic editing. The muted aesthetic here serves to counterbalance what's really a sentimental and wistful story about two childhood friends, a boy and a girl, who struggle to make it in the city after they are uprooted from their rural village. Tragedy is the result, but its occurrence comes so much after the fact — after we've soaked in all the richness of the film's details — that it's basically comic. Based on scriptwriter Wu Nien-jen's experiences growing up in a poor mining village, the story contributes much to the film's simplicity and warmth, as much as the intimate, documentary-style performances. *Dust* is only difficult for those who've lost patience for the way of life that this film pays homage to.