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# movies

## YI YI

★★★★

Directed and written by Edward Yang  
With Wu Nien-jen, Elaine Jin, Kelly Lee,  
Jonathan Chang, Issey Ogata, and Ke  
Suyun.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

## ALONE IN A CROWD

“Happy families are all alike,” begins *Anna Karenina*. “Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” The way in which the Jians, the central family in Edward Yang’s 173-minute *Yi Yi*, are unhappy is difficult to pinpoint in a word or phrase, but Yang sees this father, mother, teenage daughter, eight-year-old son, and grandmother as the five fingers of a single hand, each one gradually becoming paralyzed and isolated.

Yang’s films are all set in Taipei, and only one of them, *A Brighter Summer Day*, isn’t contemporary. One thing that’s special about them is that they don’t coast along on the actions of a single hero or protagonist. The best of them—in descending order, *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991), *Yi Yi* (2000), *Taipei Story* (1985), and *Mahjong* (1996)—are about groups more than individuals; in *A Brighter Summer Day* the group is a class of high school boys



in the early 60s, in *Yi Yi* it’s a screwed-up middle-class family in the late 90s, in *Taipei Story* it’s three separate troubled generations during Taiwan’s economic boom in the mid-80s, and in *Mahjong* it’s a dispersed pack of ailing and confused individuals in the mid-90s who are driven nuts by capitalism, or by what Yang calls “a Confucian confusion” about capitalism. (Some Western commentators have confidently labeled Yang a postmodernist, but their assumption that there’s a universal modernity seems ethnocentric; as a rough equivalent, Asians might call George W. Bush post-Confucian.)

What’s the source of the Jian family’s dysfunction and pain? Writer-director Yang doesn’t say precisely, but

he does give us a precise feeling for the contours of their collective condition, while hinting at the outset that denial and forgetfulness—the latter a recurring motif in the film’s opening stretches—are involved. More subtly, he hints at their separateness from one another by rarely showing them together and by emphasizing their lack of rapport and intimacy at the infrequent family gatherings, including the stiff poses for wedding photographs that open the picture and the almost equally stiff groupings at a funeral at the end.

N.J.—the middle-aged father, who’s working for a failing computer company that’s bankrolled by a mogul with the style of a gangster—doesn’t seem ever to

have loved his wife, Min-min (Elaine Jin), who seems even more alienated than he is working in her own nondescript office. He’s the closest thing this movie has to a protagonist—though he can’t be fully understood without his wife and kids, and his usual lack of awareness of what they’re going through prevents him from being a hero. N.J. is played by the charismatic Wu Nien-jen, one of the most talented people in Taiwan—a major TV talk-show host; a major screenwriter for Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Ann Hui; and a major filmmaker in his own right, judging from his first two features, *A Borrowed Life* (1994) and *Buddha Bless America* (1996). His almost Keatonesque melancholy is never allowed to

obscure our realization that his character, even as a principled idealist, is in a cocoon of his own making.

The only character N.J. looks up to is a Japanese games designer named Mr. Ota (Issey Ogata), whom N.J.’s company wants him to court (N.J. and Ota converse only in English, and Yang may be drawing on the seven years he spent in America working as a computer-systems designer). Ota seems to play the same role in relation to N.J.—catering to him and soliciting his admiration—that a Buddhist guru plays in relation to N.J.’s wife. It’s ambiguous whether Yang regards Ota with equivalent awe, though it seems doubtful that he does.

Min-min’s mother (Tang Ruyun) suffers a stroke on the same day that her debt-ridden brother (Chen Xisheng) marries his pregnant girlfriend (Xiao Shushen) at a gala bash—a mainly comic event that’s already somewhat charged when the brother’s former fiancée turns up in a drunken and hysterical state and N.J. accidentally runs into a former girlfriend, Sherry (Ke Suyun), whom he hasn’t seen in three decades (and who now lives in Chicago and is married to an American who does business in China).

Over the next few days, Min-min starts undergoing an apparent spiritual crisis that looks very much like a nervous breakdown, then follows her guru to his mountain temple to meditate. She becomes the family member who’s absent the most, more even than her comatose mother, now home from the hospital. The doctor has urged the other family members to speak to the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

## film ratings

- ★★★★ Masterpiece
- ★★★ A must-see
- ★★ Worth seeing
- ★ Has redeeming facet
- Worthless



## movies

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

grandmother whenever possible because it might eventually rouse her; it doesn't, unless one counts a fantasy sequence near the end—the first I remember in a Yang film. Whose fantasy this is, or even whether it is a fantasy, is less obvious than it initially appears to be; the scene might be rising from the family's collective unconscious rather than from any individual's imagination.

Ting-ting (Kelly Lee), the teenage

daughter, thinks she might be responsible for the stroke. After escorting her grandmother home from the wedding party, she starts to collect the garbage in their high-rise flat but gets distracted by the new neighbors moving in, including another teenage girl, Lili (Adrian Lin), who quickly becomes a close friend. Returning home that evening, Ting-ting discovers that her grandmother was found unconscious in the driveway next to the trash cans and concludes she might have been carrying down trash her granddaughter had overlooked.

Yang-yang (Jonathan Chang), her kid brother, gets teased mercilessly by

little girls at the wedding, then refuses to eat until N.J. takes him to a nearby fast-food outlet. Though he won't speak to his grandmother until after she's dead, he becomes obsessed with discovering the sort of truth people can't see, taking photos of "mosquitoes" (which look like snapshots of empty rooms) and of the backs of people's heads, the half of their reality they can never see—the same half Yang is concerned with.

This doesn't exhaust the film's cast of central characters—which also includes Min-min's excitable and superstitious brother, his equally vulgar wife, and Lili's mother—but it suggests the

sort of displacements most of Yang's characters experience. In his earlier films, such displacements are made to seem characteristic of Taiwan itself—a country in an existential crisis, not knowing how much its identity belongs to other countries that have occupied or otherwise dominated it, such as Japan, China, and the U.S.—but here they seem a more general condition of contemporary urban living.

It wasn't surprising that Edward Yang got the prize for best direction at Cannes last year—he's been making masterful films in Taiwan for almost 20 years. None of them besides *Yi Yi* has

been distributed in the U.S., but all of them except a two-part TV film made at the beginning of his career (*Floating Weeds*, 1981) have been screened here, most notably at the Film Center's invaluable Yang retrospective in late 1997. (People who want to catch up with Yang's masterpiece *A Brighter Summer Day* can do so at the Film Center on March 23 and 30.)

It was a pleasant surprise when *Yi Yi* was voted best foreign film of 2000 by the New York Critics Circle—a turn of events reportedly influenced by a strong opposition to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which for obscure reasons appears to have been more prevalent in New York than anywhere else. But the biggest surprise of all came when the National Society of Film Critics, at its annual meeting in early January (which I attended), named *Yi Yi* the best film of the year—the first time the organization had given such an honor to a foreign-language film since Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* in 1986. One can safely wager that this wasn't some backhanded way of granting Yang belated recognition, because most of the NSFC's members remain as ignorant of his six previous features as the general public. Instead I think it signified a growing perception that what's happening in the world of movies isn't necessarily what we read about in mainstream magazines or hear about on radio or TV.

For a long time many people have innocently assumed that we hear so much about studio product because that's all the public cares about—just as many people assume that the world news we get reflects what the public wants to hear about. But the consequences when the media minimize the existence or significance of major facts on the pretext that this somehow matches the "public interest" can be disastrous. So when we read that the sanctions in Iraq have been a "failure," we're often told that they've failed only because they haven't weakened Saddam Hussein—not that they've failed because they've deprived many Iraqis of medicine and clean water, resulting in a million deaths, half of them children (a "conservative estimate," according to a staffer at the American Friends Service Committee). The media still tend to equate Iraq with Saddam—a dictator America helped set up and who was oppressing Iraqi citizens long before we went to war with him—rather than with the populace, ironically mirroring his own hubris.

U.S. distributors have generally assumed that Americans couldn't possibly have any interest in Taiwanese cinema beyond Ang Lee's movies—even though his main accomplishment prior to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden*



• *Dragon* appears to have been proving that middle-class taste and reflexes across the globe supersede national identity. One of the interesting things about *Yi Yi*—which centers on a middle-class family in a Taipei that's not exotic, apart from a few stray details (boys and girls attend separate schools)—is that it has almost nothing in common with Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* or *Eat Drink Man Woman*. In other words, Yang's masterpiece makes clear something that should have been evident all along—Taiwanese artists are just as different from one another as American artists. In fact, if we go to *Yi Yi* looking for a statement about Taiwan, we might miss what's most important about it—what it has to say about living on the planet.

■

Lili, the teenager who lives next door to Ting-ting, plays the cello, and at one point Ting-ting plays Gershwin's "Summertime" on the piano. Each character in the film is partially conceived as a solo instrument that on occasion joins another in a duet, and Yang translates the film's Chinese title as "one one," which also means "individually." (His suggested English title for the film, which hasn't caught on, is *A One and a Two*, referring to a jazz musician's count-off before starting a jam session.) "Nothing's changed here," N.J. remarks to Min-min when she returns from her guru's mountain retreat. "The kids are both fine." On the face of it, no statement could be blander; yet considering what we've just seen over the past two and a half hours of Ting-ting, Yang-yang, and N.J. himself, it might be the saddest single moment in the whole film—a kind of condensation of all the things N.J. fails or refuses to cope with into a single platitude.

This moment is preceded by the film's most richly orchestrated musical section, a complex and elegant fugue that's set in motion when N.J. uses his visit with Mr. Ota in Tokyo to set up a reunion between himself and Sherry. Yang pointedly cuts between this reunion and a date between Ting-ting and Lili's former boyfriend, a troubled kid named "Fatty," back in Taipei—each couple figuring in a kind of counterpoint to the other to show the same problems recurring across generations.

There are also significant echoes in *Yi Yi* of earlier Yang pictures—not specific references so much as elements and locations in Taipei that Yang keeps coming back to: the same sort of underpasses (including the one where the romantic encounters of Lili and Ting-ting with Fatty get played out, punctuated by shifting weather and changing traffic lights), the same kind of skyscraper framings, the same reflections in plate-glass windows, the same shaded outdoor restaurants. And if I'm not mistaken, Yang-yang attends the same school that served as the central location in *A Brighter Summer Day*, the same one Yang himself attended in the 60s. Such touchstones are so prominent in Yang's work that the rare shot that does without architecture of any kind—such as the sudden glimpse of blue sky and moving clouds that concludes the fugue between Tokyo and Taipei—registers with particular poignancy.

Yang, who often favors framing his characters in long shot, especially when they're interacting most intimately with others—situating them in their environments and watching them from a thoughtful distance—shows more humor and warmth in *Yi Yi* than in most of his other pictures. (Much of this involves Yang-yang, the most isolated and least understood of all the family members.) There's also less anger than in *Mahjong*, Yang's previous picture—leading a few of his older fans to eye this movie with some suspicion, as if the iconoclastic filmmaker had somehow gone soft. Yet the undertow of tragic separateness between the characters in *Yi Yi* may be even more pronounced than the divisions in his other features—a separateness the comedy may momentarily distract us from without ever diminishing. ■