

Mark Lyken's *Táifēng and the Motorway Saint*
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Táifēng and the Motorway Saint was shot during a month long residency in Taipei, Taiwan at the Taipei Artist Village, when filmmaker Mark Lyken was there to gather material for a commission for the 2017 Sonica festival and Cryptic in Glasgow. Lyken shot the film over twenty-one consecutive days across Taipei, Kaohsiung and Tainan, journeying across the country on public transport, on foot and on the back of a scooter during the *táifēng* (typhoon) season. Using a fixed camera, Lyken's technique explores the possibilities of duration, static composition and location sound recording and in so doing, allows the urban environment to unfold before us at an unhurried pace. *Táifēng and the Motorway Saint* foregrounds urban spaces in which the commonplace, micro-narratives of the everyday that usually go unnoticed are quietly, and unobtrusively, documented.

In this respect, *Táifēng* shares some similarities with his earlier works (made in collaboration with Emma Dove such as *Mirror Lands* (2014) and *Hame* (2015) both in terms of their interest in duration and their use of an observational documentary mode. However, more recent works, such as *Táifēng* (2018), the 8-minute long *Hell Valley* (2017) and *New Town New Wave* (2018) appear to be constructed more simply. Using relatively long shot lengths, the focus is dictated by whatever happens to occur in the frame at that particular moment - ambient sound of traffic noise, construction work or a monk's prayer machine for example does little to direct our attention or distract us. There is no obvious narrative arc or event as such - instead, audiences are invited to contemplate the (in)action on screen and to piece together the sequences. While these seemingly unrelated sequences could



feel quite fragmentary, when watched together with the voiceover soundtrack, which was recorded during a screening of the film at Ting Shuo Hear Say in Tainan, the work does seem to follow a narrative arc of sorts.

The commentary adds a layer of translation or interpretation for the non-Taiwanese audience but rather than explaining the 'meanings' of particular images, their responses are equally contemplative as the openness of Lyken's use of sound and image invites philosophical reflections on matters such as what it means to be Taiwanese in contemporary postcolonial Taiwan; the significance of language and what its loss might mean for one's cultural identity; the importance of acknowledging the nation's past; and on how the country sees itself and presents itself to the outside world. This latter point is particularly interesting as the commentators are no doubt mindful of the fact that the film and their voice-overs will be listened to by non-Taiwanese audiences in the UK and beyond. In light of this, the use of duration in the film creates space for moments of self-reflection, such as 'I wonder what other countries think about us having so many scooters?' While these kinds of responses may have been prompted by self-consciousness (brought about by a foreigner filming their worlds), what results is a fascinating, and often gently humorous, dialogue between the film and its Taiwanese audience/collaborators where meaning is shaped through conversation rather than imposed by an external, objectifying touristic gaze. An example of this occurs at the beginning of the film where we see a static long shot of the ventilation pipes from the underground shopping mall, while one commentator remarks that they don't understand why Lyken would be interested in filming them, these geometric shapes take on a supernatural air however when the voiceover goes on to describe the 'mystical smell' in the malls. Later we hear of the

death of a child at a now abandoned theme park underneath a motorway and the architectural inappropriateness of skyscraper towers for the Taiwanese, given their cultural association with death. The references to mortality and the afterlife that occur at these points in the film, especially in the context of the mundane everyday, add an evocative layer of meaning to the images we see. Space is not neutral or 'empty' in Asian countries but is bursting with the energies and spirits of those who have gone before. The juxtaposition of sound and image here suggests that the quiet stillness of the spaces we see on screen is perhaps then just an illusion.

The presence of the audio track commentary guides our understanding of the cultural significance of these images but also does much more than this to give insight into the complexities and ambiguities that shape contemporary, postcolonial Taiwan. In particular, the commentary describes attitudes of some young Taiwanese as they discuss issues of cultural hybridity, Taiwanese identity and the history of migration across the region, and in particular, the relationship of Taiwan to mainland China. Implicit in their conversation is the backdrop of the colonial history of the region. Taiwan was colonized by the Dutch in the 17th Century, followed by the Han Chinese and briefly by the Spanish. Following the first Sino-Japanese War in 1896, the country was taken from the Qing empire by the Japanese, later becoming a strategically important military base for the Japanese during World War II. Following WWII, the Republic of China took control over Taiwan and ruled the country for the next 40 years until democratic reforms in the 1980s led to Taiwan's first presidential election in 1996. Since then, Taiwan has seen rapid industrialization and economic growth and as one commentator tells us: 'It feels like Taiwan is still very young. Just trying to find its own way.'



The sense of a cultural and social shift in Taiwan is expressed at several points in the voice over. The voices we hear reflect on the perceived disappearance of Taiwanese cultural identity – particularly through the declining use of the language and there is a notable tension in some of the dialogue that relates to the difficulties of acknowledging the past, and in particular the traumatic history of the country's experience of invasion. One commentator remarks that they do not see themselves as being truly Taiwanese, given their Chinese heritage – this leads to a sense of cultural dislocation: 'I think the only ones who deserve to call themselves Taiwanese are the aboriginals. You and I, we are not aboriginals. We are from China but we don't want to call ourselves Chinese. I think this lack of internalization is because we want to get away from our roots...If you can't confront your history you are not going to move forward.' There is a sense from the voiceover too, however, that since

independence, Taiwan has become a much more liberal and clearly prosperous country. However, other markers of change are noted with some regret – such as the specialist shops that sell just one product being subsumed by the proliferation of 7/11s. What made these urban centres distinctively local is now being lost to the global markers of capitalist neoliberalism. Another shot of roadworks and construction reveals a city in constant flux as we hear (with some exasperation) ‘they’re digging up the roads again!’ Through the voice-over, we come to understand that the spaces that Lyken chooses to pause on are significant for the Taiwanese audience in terms of how they represent in different ways, how the Taiwanese see themselves and their place in the rapidly changing world.

