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Transcultural Appropriation and Aesthetic Breakthrough of Hollywood Film Noir in Contemporary Taiwan Suspense Thriller Films: A Case Study of *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2017)

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Abstract: The production of suspense thriller films has recently surged in Taiwan. These films adopt narrative techniques and visual aesthetics reminiscent of classic and neo-noir Hollywood cinema but also address social issues in Taiwan and represent transcultural aesthetic appropriation of film noir. This article employs a case study approach to examine the narrative and visual style of the Taiwanese suspense thriller *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2017), using film narratology as a textual analytical framework. This study considers themes, characters, visual style, and narrative structures, focusing on fundamental characteristics of classic film noir and neo-noir. This study reveals that the selected film both appropriates and deviates from the aesthetics of Hollywood film noir. It effectively incorporates aesthetic elements from classic Hollywood film noir and neo-noir, enriching the intricacies of storytelling and character depiction, while also localizing them through complex narrative strategies and nuanced Taiwanese cultural and social elements. The film brings attention to several prevalent issues in Taiwan's media landscape, including truth manipulation, sensationalism, tabloidization, and conglomerate and political control. The film portrays Yi-Chi as a morally compromised character embodying the detective archetype with classic noir traits, while also reflecting the "Eastern mentality" in Taiwan journalism. Despite his moral compromises, Yi-Chi partly retains traditional virtues, presenting a nuanced view of human nature that blends pessimism and optimism in Taiwan. This approach creates a distinct cross-cultural narrative that resonates emotionally with Taiwanese audiences, while also contributing to the broader global cinematic discourse on film noir.

Keywords: *Who Killed Cock Robin*; classic Hollywood film noir; neo-noir; transcultural aesthetic appropriation; Taiwanese culture; Taiwanese suspense thriller films

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1. Introduction

The production of suspense thriller films has recently surged in Taiwan. Notably, 2017 saw the release of *Who Killed Cock Robin* (*Mujizhe*, 目擊者), *Pigeon Tango* (*Daomingshi*, 盜命師), and *The Bold, The Corrupt and the Beautiful* (*Xue Guanyin*, 血觀音), all of which captivated audiences through a combination of crime narratives, unexpected plot twists and revelations, the creation of a tense atmosphere, and a sense of uncertainty. These films have simultaneously adopted the narrative strategies and visual styles commonly associated with Hollywood film noir while catering to the local market by incorporating Taiwanese social issues and customs. This dynamic blend offers an intriguing exploration of transcultural aesthetic appropriation within the film noir genre.

Film noir originated in Hollywood during the 1940s and 1950s and explores the darker facets of human nature and societal depravity. It often features morally flawed anti-heroes, typically male, who serve as narrators and protagonists. These protagonists frequently become entangled with femme fatales, who assume roles as adversaries or antagonists (Naremore 2008, pp. 9–39; Schatz 1981, pp. 171–225). In terms of narrative structure, film noir commonly employs techniques such as flashbacks, voiceovers, and intricate, nightmarish plotlines (Luhr 2012, pp. 296–98; Schatz 1981, pp. 171–225). The visual style of

film noir draws inspiration from German expressionist film aesthetics, characterized by chiaroscuro lighting, oblique composition, and rainy or smoky nocturnal scene settings. These visual elements convey the sense of filth and malevolence of both modern urban settings and human nature (Place and Peterson 1996, pp. 65–76).

The film noir genre has evolved to incorporate a diverse range of styles, but core themes—such as the darkness, depravity, and despair inherent in human nature—have remained central and endured across generations (Spicer 2002, p. 3). Film noir enjoys an influence well beyond the United States, permeating Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Scholars worldwide, including Chi-Yun Shin, Mark Bould, Mark Gallagher, and James Narmore, have challenged the notion that film noir is confined to Hollywood, instead recognizing it as a cross-cultural film genre[1]. They provide a more comprehensive understanding of how film noir has traversed cultural and geographical boundaries and interacted with local contexts.

Recognizing Taiwanese suspense thrillers as a variant of Hollywood film noir opens significant scholarly possibilities. Mark Gallagher's concept of "East Asian film noir" introduces a fresh framework for analyzing the aesthetics of East Asian cinema. This notion underscores the transnational and transregional dissemination of film noir aesthetics. The anthology edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Mark Gallagher underlines the transcultural critical perspective of film noir through its subtitle "Transnational Encounters and Intercultural Dialogues" signifying the cross-cultural, transnational, and trans-regional nature of this genre (Shin and Gallagher 2015, pp. 3–5). This perspective not only acknowledges East Asian film noir's homage to, and reinterpretation of, Hollywood film noir aesthetics, but also underscores the identification and exploration of native forms of film noir (Gallagher 2015, p. 4). Thus, Taiwanese suspense thrillers can be seen as distinct variations of Hollywood film noir, where Taiwanese characteristics are incorporated into the mode of film noir. This perspective on Taiwanese suspense thrillers provides deeper insights into the intricate interplay between global cinematic trends and regional cultural nuances.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Taiwan lacks a strong tradition of crime film, suspense thriller, and film noir filmmaking. In the history of Taiwanese cinema, comedy, romance, martial arts, and family melodrama have been the locally favored genres, whereas crime films and suspense thrillers, which expose the darker facets of society and human nature, have seen limited production. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, so-called "social realist" films were popular, like *Never Too Late to Repent* (1978) and *The Queen Bee* (1981), which heavily feature elements of crime, erotica, and violence. Their box office success can be attributed to collective repression, fear, and anxiety prevalent in Taiwanese society due to ongoing societal transitions (Hou 2006; Lee 1997; Lu 1995). Between 1978 and 1983, the number of films in this genre reached 117 (Lu 1995, p. 261). These films commonly portray the criminal activities of gangsters and the revenge-seeking actions of female victims, featuring a sentimental aesthetic that highlights the sensationalism of bloodshed and violence. As a result, they are often scorned by scholars for their perceived low artistic quality and vulgarity. However, the production of these films sharply declined after 1983 and eventually faded into obscurity (Lee 1997). By contrast, suspense thrillers, where the narrative builds suspense through twists, turns, and unexpected revelations, exhibited a lower level of production and have never been a predominant genre in the Taiwan film industry. The official *2017 Taiwan Film Industry Survey* indicates that, from 2013 to 2017, romance and comedy genres dominated the local feature films, constituting 25.6% and 24.0% of releases, respectively, compared to just 8.0% for suspense thrillers (Taiwan Ministry of Culture 2018, p. 27). Nonetheless, the production of suspense thrillers has gradually increased, with a significant surge in 2017. From 2013 to 2017, suspense thrillers rose from 4.9% of Taiwanese films produced in 2013 (three films) to 8.7% in 2016 (five films), and 14.3% in 2017 (nine films) (Taiwan Ministry of Culture 2018, p. 27)[2]. Film critic Chong Ming-Fei 鍾明非 argues that new filmmakers "are not burdened by strict adherence to conventions," and "represent the most dynamic and promising aspect of the entire film industry" (Chong 2016). Works from these new filmmakers include suspense

thrillers such as *The Laundryman* (青田街一號, 2015), *The Bride* (屍憶, 2015), and *The Tag-Along* (紅衣小女孩, 2015). Moreover, 2017 has seen a surge in local suspense thriller productions in Taiwan, exemplified by films like *Who Killed Cock Robin*, *Pigeon Tango*, and *The Bold, The Corrupt and the Beautiful*. However, academic studies continue to neglect Taiwanese suspense thrillers.

Contemporary Taiwanese filmmakers of suspense thrillers face a challenge to draw on local film heritage for aesthetic inspiration. As a result, they must seek to incorporate the enriching narrative strategies and aesthetic expressions from Hollywood film noir, effectively using them as artistic "fertilizer". This context leads to the formulation of the research questions: How do contemporary Taiwanese suspense thrillers adapt and localize the aesthetics of Hollywood film noir? More specifically, how do emerging Taiwanese directors adeptly assimilate and potentially modify the artistic elements of Hollywood film noir, including character settings, narrative strategies, visual style, and more, to create a dynamic interplay with Taiwanese cultural and social aspects?

This article approaches the above questions by using the Taiwanese film *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2017) as a case study. Several factors inform this choice of case study: First, compared to other Taiwanese suspense thrillers, *Who Killed Cock Robin* showcases artistic qualities reminiscent of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood film noir. This includes its character depictions, narrative structure, and visual presentation, as elaborated below. Second, the film achieved significant success in 2017, earning a total revenue of TWD 52,415,812, ranking fifth in local box office receipts (Taiwan Ministry of Culture 2018, p. 21), and outperforming other Taiwanese suspense thrillers. Third, director Cheng Wei-Hao frequently identifies his film as a suspense thriller inspired by other films in this genre (Weng 2017). This article analyses *Who Killed Cock Robin* to dissect its process of appropriation, learning, and potential modification of the aesthetics commonly associated with Hollywood film noir. The article includes character setting, narrative mode, visual style, theme, and more. Moreover, this article explores how the film balances film noir aesthetics and Taiwanese cultural elements.

2. Analysis of The Character Setting

The core of classic film noir lies in decadent masculinity and the disillusionment of desire (Luhr 2012, pp. 28–31). Gender roles within film noir are subversive: one side portrays a broken male protagonist, while the other often features a powerful and sinister *femme fatale*. Male protagonists are often morally questionable antiheroes, including private detectives, troubled policemen, gangsters, or individuals of ambiguous social positions. They teeter on the brink of death, despairing and decadent, often struggling with emasculation, control over women, and even their own destiny. Conversely, the beautiful, intelligent, and energetic *femme fatale*s, who seduce, exploit, manipulate, betray, and even destroy their sexual partners (including the male protagonists), are unsettling and perplexing figures. The relationship of the male protagonist with the *femme fatale* encapsulates the former's castration anxiety. Classic examples include *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). This pattern is also evident in Hollywood neo-noir films of the 1970s and 1980s like *Chinatown* (1974) and *Body Heat* (1981). Characters like Walter in *Double Indemnity* and Ned in *Body Heat* become ensnared by *femme fatale*s Phyllis and Matty, respectively, ultimately leading them to commit murder. At the end of the story, the *femme fatale* is often killed by a man, the male lead, or the incarcerated. Contrary to the views of earlier scholars who saw the *femme fatale* merely as an embodiment of urban malevolence and a metaphor for misogyny, Janey Place (1998) contends that film noir innovatively cast female characters as rivals to their male counterparts. These rivals—the *femme fatale*s—exemplify the qualities of modern women: independence, resilience, bravery, and intelligence. Place, therefore, considers the *femme fatale* to have a progressive significance (Place 1998). Additionally, film noir frequently incorporates "brutally violent, sexually confused" male psychopaths as supporting characters who consistently meet their fate at

the hands of the male lead (Schatz 1981, p. 114). These characters are symbols of modern urban malevolence and societal chaos.

The character dynamics in *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2017) largely adhere to the conventions of classic Hollywood film noir, setting an isolated and morally compromised male protagonist against a dominant female. These film noir character dynamics are situated within the contemporary media landscape of Taiwan, accentuating both the darker facets of Taiwanese media culture and the sociological implications of the film. The analysis can be divided into the following two facets:

(1) The Fundamental Perspective of the Narrative: Wang Yi-Chi, a Solitary and Decadent Detective in the Urban Jungle.

The story revolves around Wang Yi-Chi, a newspaper journalist who symbolizes the media chaos and political corruption in contemporary Taiwan. The film begins by showcasing Yi-Chi's keen interest in the private lives of political figures and his impatient, opportunistic mindset. Upon hearing of a car accident, he promptly drives to the scene and becomes the first eyewitness. Instead of immediately assisting the injured, who include a legislator named Zhang and a young model named Rebecca, Yi-Chi pens an article on extramarital affairs involving these two injured victims. Neglecting to check the facts, Yi-Chi disseminates his article to the newspaper (he works for) in a bid to secure an exclusive scoop. To secure the scoop, both Maggie (Yi-Chi's team leader) and Mr. Qiu (Yi-Chi's boss) also agree to quickly expose the scandal, without first doing any fact-checking. The salacious news story sparks widespread outrage and seriously threatens Zhang's political standing. However, Legislator Zhang then angrily reveals that he and Rebecca have recently married. Other media then labeled the sex scandal fake news, damaging Yi-Chi's reputation and leading to his dismissal by the newspaper. These events highlight Yi-Chi's ethical shortcomings and fringe societal position, which are reminiscent of the archetypal male lead in film noir. The initial "scandal" establishes the film's noir essence, foreshadowing further scandalous revelations and exposing the underbelly of modern Taiwanese politics and media.

Yi-Chi's predicament needs to be understood within the context of Taiwan's media deregulation and the chaotic media landscape that followed the lifting of martial law in 1988. Many scholars (Chen 2011, 2016; Lin 2008; Wu 2009) claim the contemporary evolution of Taiwan's newspaper industry has been from government control to a more commercially driven paradigm, with increasing involvement of conglomerates and competing political parties. The emergence of new media platforms such as cable television and the internet has also fragmented audience attention, increasing competitive pressures in the newspaper market. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the entry of the Hong Kong-based Next Digital media group, known for *Next Magazine* and *Apple Daily*, has further intensified competition in the Taiwanese media market (Chen 2016; Lin 2008). These publications attract readership through sensational words and images, including sex scandals and crime news, and have rapidly gained market share (Chen 2016; Lin 2008; Wang 2015). Journalists with commercial motivations often resort to sensational language and headlines, or rush to produce exclusive scoops without sufficient regard for fact-checking and journalistic integrity, leading to a proliferation of fake news (Chen 2011). Additionally, political factions employ various subtle tactics, such as placing sympathetic individuals within newspapers to influence editorial content, effectively transforming the newspaper industry into a tool for pushing partisan political agendas. In this context, political journalists often resemble paparazzi in their pursuit of political figures, showing little regard for basic rights such as privacy (Chen 2011). They resort to illegal methods to gather negative information about political figures and expose such information without restraint to inflict reputational damage. Yi-Chi works for a profit-driven newspaper, and his attempt to capitalize on his knowledge of the sexual relationship between Legislator Zhang and Rebecca underscores the stark reality of how corporate interests and political affiliations influence the press in Taiwan. Despite his position, Yi-Chi appears oblivious to the close relationship between his employer and Legislator Zhang, as well as the infiltration of his newspaper

by a specific political faction. When Zhang threatens legal action against the newspaper for defamation, Yi-Chi becomes a casualty of political infighting and loses his job. This scenario highlights the covert nature of political interference within the newspaper industry, reflecting the intricate dynamics that exist between Taiwan's press and political entities.

The successive misfortunes that Yi-Chi encounters thereafter symbolize the basic anxieties of contemporary Taiwanese society: in a media environment dominated by infotainment, the public finds it hard to trust news reporting and verify the truth. Trouble with his used car leads Yi-Chi to discover that the vehicle was involved in the hit-and-run he witnessed nine years earlier. The mechanic, Yi-Chi's friend Ah Ji, discovers that Yi-Chi's used car is an "assembled car"—a vehicle made from parts of different cars, often mixing various makes, models, or vehicle types. Yi-Chi was naturally unaware when purchasing the car, and his becoming the victim of fraud further exposes the immorality of modern urban society. The plot thickens as he investigates the previous owner of this assembled car. Meanwhile, his behavior becomes reminiscent of the morally flawed detective in classic Hollywood film noir. In his quest to find the previous owner of the assembled car, Yi-Chi astutely employs both financial incentives and sexual favors to secure the cooperation of the police. His amicable interactions with law enforcement suggest his history of employing such underhanded methods. With police assistance, Yi-Chi uncovers that his assembled car was involved in a hit-and-run nine years earlier, which resulted in the death of the owner and the post-crash disappearance of a female passenger. Yi-Chi realizes he was a witness to that accident, driving himself to uncover the truth behind this long-forgotten story.

The plot takes multiple turns, swiftly spiraling beyond Yi-Chi's control. Leveraging his knowledge of Taiwan's tea industry, Yi-Chi locates Hsu Ai-Ting, the female passenger who survived the accident. Unfortunately, Ai-Ting is abducted by a gangster during a phone call with Yi-Chi. Yi-Chi thus embarks on a mission to rescue Ai-Ting, and so becomes ensnared in a web of danger. Yi-Chi recalls that during the chaos of the accident, he photographed the license plate of the fleeing vehicle, but the images were too blurry to make the plate number clear. Yi-Chi, deducing the possible license plate number from unclear photos, enlists police support for verification and finds that one of the possible plate numbers corresponds to that of the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, a politician called Mr. Qiu. As he is about to contact Mr. Qiu to inquire about the accident nine years earlier, Yi-Chi receives a call from Ah Ji, his car mechanic friend, who asks Yi-Chi to come to his house and hear the truth about the hit-and-run. Upon arriving at Ah Ji's residence, Yi-Chi is horrified to discover Ah Ji lying dead from a fall, with Mr. Qiu beside him. Mr. Qiu explains that Ah Ji has just committed suicide, motivated by guilt about being the driver responsible for the hit-and-run. Yi-Chi is very suspicious of Mr. Qiu's words. Mr. Qiu has become Taiwan's Minister of the Interior, and Ah Ji's death appears linked to his political influence. As the narrative progresses, it is revealed that Ah Ji was murdered, cautioning Yi-Chi against further probing the hit-and-run incident. Ah Ji's death, instead of creating suspense, thus underscores the grim nature of Taiwanese politics and becomes part of a political scandal.

Examining the male social dynamic between Mr. Qiu and Yi-Chi provides insights into the construction of masculinity and male authoritarianism in Taiwanese society. Ah Ji's death sees the relationship between Mr. Qiu and Yi-Chi transition from that of mentor-mentee to something adversarial. Superficially, Mr. Qiu embodies the corruption in Taiwanese politics, while Yi-Chi, dedicated to unveiling the truth behind the traffic accident, symbolizes the challenge to this corruption. However, their adversarial relationship is also complex. As Yi-Chi's supervisor and mentor at the newspaper, Mr. Qiu trains him to become an astute reporter, emphasizing that a journalist should be an objective observer rather than an active participant. Yi-Chi emulates Mr. Qiu's masculinity, becoming an invaluable asset at the newspaper. Nevertheless, Mr. Qiu's actions contradict his teachings. He murders to conceal the truth of the hit-and-run and safeguard his political power. Keenly observant, Yi-Chi deduces Mr. Qiu's involvement in the hit-and-run. In the latter

part of the story, Yi-Chi leverages the hit-and-run to make Mr. Qiu secure him a position in the Ministry of the Interior, facilitating his entry into politics. This homosocial dynamic between Mr. Qiu and Yi-Chi echoes that between the senior and junior male characters in Hollywood film noir, where the male lead discovers his own dark tendencies through interactions with older male figures, all within "a seemingly relentless cycle of criminality" (Short 2019, p. 94). Her (2017) contends that one characteristic of Taiwanese journalists is their compliance with media organizations controlled by conglomerates and political parties, rather than challenging authority and upholding press freedom. He refers to this trait as the "Eastern mentality" of Taiwanese journalists (2017, p. 195). Reflecting this trait, Yi-Chi's thirst for political power surpasses his desire to pursue justice, revealing his craftiness, mercantilism, and selfishness—all of which not only represent the masculinity nurtured in the competitive urban jungle but also imply his submission to male authoritarianism.

(2) Gender Dynamics: Decadent Men vs. *Femme Fatale*s.

This film inherits the gender dynamics typical of film noir, namely the decadent detective versus *femme fatales*, but situates these gender interactions within a more intricate web of character relationships. This both heightens the suspense and contributes to the development of new female archetypes. The film features two *femme fatale*s who differ in status, personality, and destiny, showcasing complex gender politics. This analysis will focus on the interactive relationships between the two *femme fatale*s and the male characters, aiming to reflect on the extent to which the film echoes gender dynamics similar to those in contemporary Hollywood film noir, and serves as a metaphor for female power in Taiwan's modern urban society.

The main *femme fatale*, Maggie, is simultaneously Yi-Chi's team leader and the object of his pursuit, challenging traditional gender hierarchies. Like her counterparts in Hollywood film noir, Maggie exudes a sense of mystery. In the first half of the film, her true thoughts and motivations remain obscure, with her subtle facial expressions in low-key lighting portraying her as a cunning and unsettling woman. After her boyfriend fails to respond to her attempts to contact him, she initiates a sexual relationship with Yi-Chi. Her behavior during the sex scene, shot in low-key lighting, suggests that she is using Yi-Chi for sexual revenge against her boyfriend.

In the latter half of the film, the complexity of Maggie's personality unfolds, revealing her multifaceted conflicts and compromises with male characters. Her extramarital affair with Mr. Qiu, her so-called boyfriend and ex-teacher, is exposed, along with her involvement in both the hit-and-run incident and the subsequent death of Ah Ji. Maggie is not entirely cold-hearted, and her dialogues with Mr. Qiu reveal her deep love for him. In a pivotal scene, Mr. Qiu visits Maggie's home, finds her drunk, and invites her to serve as both the Director of the Public Relations Office at the Ministry of the Interior, and as his assistant. Maggie tearfully recounts sacrificing ten years for their affair and laments Mr. Qiu's inability to meet her emotional needs. Mr. Qiu embraces her and promises to make it up to her, deeply moving and persuading her. This scene casts Maggie as a victim in a patriarchal society, garnering more sympathy and providing insight into why she sought revenge against Mr. Qiu. Considering Maggie's student–teacher relationship with Mr. Qiu, her love may be intertwined with admiration, and her cunning and schemes may be influenced by Mr. Qiu's teachings.

However, from Yi-Chi's perspective, Maggie is a manipulative offender, adept at controlling him. As the plot unfolds, both the audience and Yi-Chi discover that Maggie perpetrated the hit-and-run, and as a result of the accident, miscarried a child she had conceived with Mr. Qiu. After learning of Yi-Chi's intention to investigate the hit-and-run incident, Maggie pretends to assist in his investigation while secretly updating Mr. Qiu on its progress, ultimately leading to Ah Ji's murder. Maggie's interactions with Yi-Chi never display genuine affection, and through her controlling behavior she effectively "emasculates" him. In the latter half of the film, both we and Yi-Chi learn from Zhong-wen, Maggie's colleague, that Maggie suggested the newspaper fire Yi-Chi. This revelation leads Yi-Chi

to realize that Maggie is working against his interests. As the film concludes, the gender conflict between Maggie and Yi-Chi, now colleagues in the same government agency, is depicted through shot-reverse-shot sequences. With both Yi-Chi and the audience aware that their romantic relationship has dissolved, Maggie becomes Yi-Chi's most formidable rival. Importantly, the film assigns Maggie a significant role, depicting her ultimate acquisition of a position in the Ministry of the Interior. This highlights the presence of female power in contemporary Taiwanese politics. Despite most of the characters inhabiting the political sphere being male, Maggie is recognized as an important protégé of Mr. Qiu, akin to Yi-Chi. The film visually represents her masculine traits, particularly through her penchant for wearing suits, signifying she is a formidable political adversary of Yi-Chi. Maggie possesses qualities such as masculinity, talent, knowledge, intelligence, and political stature that make her a worthy rival to Yi-Chi. In this sense, she embodies the progressive significance emphasized by Place (1998). Maggie is shown to be multifaceted and complex, symbolizing the complexity of women in urban Taiwanese society: able to manipulate men, yet constrained by their romantic ties to men. Both Maggie and Yi-Chi secure their political positions through ethically questionable means; Maggie through sexual relationships, and Yi-Chi through blackmail and extortion. This plot can be viewed as a condemnation and satire of Taiwanese politics.

Contrasting with Maggie, who represents the dark side of Taiwanese politics, Hsu Ai-Ting, another *femme fatale*, symbolizes the shadowy aspects of Taiwan's underclass. Nine years ago, she, her boyfriend, and Ah Wei were low-level petty criminals living on the fringes of society, engaging in drug use and orgies, before kidnapping a wealthy businessman's daughter to sustain their degenerate lifestyle. After Ah Wei accidentally killed their hostage, Ai-Ting and her boyfriend took the ransom and abandoned Ah Wei. The pair were later hit by Mr. Qiu's car while in the mountains, hospitalizing Ai-Ting and killing her boyfriend. Ah Wei, diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder and exhibiting controlling tendencies, moved Ai-Ting from the hospital to his apartment, where he alternated between controlling and caring for her. After her recovery, Ai-Ting ran off with all the ransom money and left behind a furious and vengeful Ah Wei. Ai-Ting's betrayal is an act of resistance against Ah Wei's pathological control, showing her female agency. However, her immoral appropriation of the ransom money garners little sympathy from the audience, and this illicit money eventually leads to her demise. Ah Wei spends nine years searching for Ai-Ting, driven by his controlling love and the desire to reclaim the substantial ransom. Ironically, Yi-Chi's persistent investigation into the hit-and-run incident puts Ai-Ting in danger, as Ah Wei coincidentally happens to be the corrupt policeman assisting Yi-Chi. Police corruption allows Ah Wei to access the files related to the hit-and-run, and while tracking Yi-Chi, he discovers Ai-Ting's new address and subsequently kidnaps her.

Ai-Ting's tragic ending at the hands of Ah Wei highlights the vulnerability of lower-class women and deconstructs the myth that the role of men is to rescue women. The film shows Ah Wei's torment and humiliation of Ai-Ting, eliciting sympathy from the audience. Although Yi-Chi tries to rescue Ai-Ting, ultimately he can only witness her bloody and limbless body. Yi-Chi's vomiting in response to the grisly scene subverts the classic Hollywood motif of the man successfully rescuing the woman and casts doubt on his masculinity. This aligns with the gender dynamics in classic film noir, where men often fail to save women, especially those deemed immoral, and women are often killed by men (either the male protagonist or other male characters). Ai-Ting's bloody, naked body, depicted in a way that mixes horror with sexual allure, caters to the male gaze and is imbued with unsettling meaning and sadistic pleasure. Antithetical to feminist ideology, the uncomfortable perspective on the tragic scene contradicts feminist ideals and reveals male anxieties. Ai-Ting's dismembered body can be seen as a metaphor for the protagonist (Yi-Chi) being 'castrated' by societal decadence and the darkness of human nature. He seeks to compensate for what he perceives as an existential threat to his masculinity and alleviates his 'castration' anxiety through his new role as the head of the Public Relations Office of the Ministry of the Interior, a position initially intended for Maggie. In the final part of the film,

the shots of Ai-Ting's bloody body are intercut with flashbacks to the shot–reverse–shot scenes featuring Yi-Chi and Maggie, suggesting that both Ai-Ting and Maggie threaten Yi-Chi's masculinity. Thus the gender struggle continues.

The different fates of Maggie and Ai-Ting, two *femme fatale*s, hint at the stratified realities facing modern women in contemporary Taiwanese society. Their different fates result primarily from their distinct class statuses. Maggie, from the urban middle class, receives a good education and so gains the opportunity to be mentored by a journalist like Mr. Qiu, developing the necessary skills to engage in political conflict and masculinizing herself to confront male challenges. In contrast, Ai-Ting, hailing from a rural background, lacks access to good educational resources, grows up on the margins of society, and does not acquire the skills to advance socially or protect herself. The fates of Maggie and Ai-Ting are also closely linked to their sexual relationships. Maggie gains an opportunity at the Ministry of the Interior through her extramarital affair with Mr. Qiu, while Ai-Ting is brutally murdered after sexually defying Ah Wei. The film suggests that a woman's situation is closely tied to her use of her sexuality, conforming to film noir's depiction of the *femme fatale* and embodying its non-progressive stance on gender ideology.

3. Analysis of the Narrative Mode

Film noir employs a narrative mode wherein retrospective techniques and voice-overs convey the story, with frequent use of flashbacks to underscore a fatalistic tone regarding the characters' destinies and the resulting sense of despair. Examining the classic film noir *Citizen Kane* (1941) within the context of the Hollywood studio era, Thomas Schatz notes that film noir tends to use intricate narratives, where complex chronology intensifies feelings of hopelessness and the passage of time (Schatz 1981, p. 117). Schatz identifies a circular dual temporal narrative structure in classic Hollywood noirs, involving the past and present. Film noir often delves into the past by investigating or presenting a criminal case from the perspective of the present, often using flashbacks. Schatz suggests that this narrative strategy establishes a fatalistic tone, reinforcing the idea that protagonists cannot alter outcomes—often exemplified by such films opening with the tragic fate of the protagonist (Schatz 1981, p. 120). William Luhr refers to this narrative method as "retrospective narration" (Luhr 2012, p. 3), indicating that it heavily relies on voice-over, typically supplied by the male protagonist. Luhr proposes that this narrative technique has three effects on audience response: (1) The story becomes subjective, with the audience experiencing the protagonist's anxiety and feeling their moral decline and emotional desolation. This identification with a morally compromised protagonist creates moral uncertainty for the audience. (2) The sense of suspense is diminished, with audiences anticipating their witnessing of grim details rather than waiting to discover how the story ends. (3) The pervasive dark mood of the narrator permeates the entire film, immersing the audience in darkness as they experience the protagonist's nightmares, confusion, and hallucinations (Luhr 2012, pp. 3–5). This retrospective narrative style helps align the audience with morally ambiguous characters, further intensifying the sense of despair and fatalism inherent to film noir.

The narrative mode in *Who Killed Cock Robin* introduces complexities that differ from classic Hollywood film noir and temper the film's fatalistic qualities. Notably, adopting the male protagonist's narrative perspective without his accompanying voiceover reduces the audience's identification with the protagonist and increases the sense of suspense. Unlike classic film noir, where a voiceover reveals the male protagonist's inner thoughts and foretells his tragic end, Yi-Chi's thoughts are unclear and his future is undisclosed. Yi-Chi's true motivation for persistently investigating the hit-and-run incident remains elusive. When Yi-Chi discovers that his video of the car involved in the hit-and-run car was deliberately erased by someone in the newspaper, we speculate that he may be driven by a desire to expose the criminal activities of managers within the newspaper. As the story primarily unfolds from Yi-Chi's perspective, we, like him, discover that the hit-and-run case involves Mr. Qiu, Ah Wei, and Maggie, and simultaneously we see new layers of hu-

man depravity revealed. Moreover, we anticipate the exposure of more unsettling truths and become concerned for Yi-Chi's personal safety. The narrative mode thus intensifies the sense of suspense, in contrast to the diminished suspense typical of classic film noir. Only at the climax of the film do we learn that one of Yi-Chi's motives for investigating the case is to return TWD 2 million he stole from the hit car, this money being part of the ransom from a kidnapping.

Yi-Chi's theft might initially heighten the audience's moral discomfort, yet due to a narrative mode that weakens their identification with the protagonist, any audience's unease is likely to be constrained by their having adopted a relatively detached stance. Meanwhile, the audience will anticipate Yi-Chi's return of the stolen money to restore the social moral order. While Yi-Chi does indeed return the stolen money to Ai-Ting's grandmother at the end of the film, this act of restitution still contravenes mainstream ethics as the money is part of a ransom and was never Ai-Ting's. However, the film establishes a bizarre causal link between Ai-Ting's tragic death and Yi-Chi's investigation, allowing the audience to blame Yi-Chi for Ai-Ting's death and view his final act of restitution as symbolic atonement for Ai-Ting's demise. This approach elevates the ethical dimension and sets it apart from the pervasive sense of despair typical of classic film noir.

Additionally, the narrative incorporates perspectives of other supporting characters, presenting either their genuine or false pasts, which creates ambiguity and increased suspense, while leaving the audience oscillating between trust and unease. For example, Ah Wei's perspective is employed to delve into his sadomasochistic history with Ai-Ting and her betrayal of him, offering insight into his motivations for seeking revenge. In another example, Mr. Qiu's detailed recounting of the car accident is directly visualized to present two versions of the truth: one where Ah Ji caused the accident while driving drunk, and another where Mr. Qiu himself caused the accident. Mr. Qiu offers the second version only after Yi-Chi uncovers evidence that disproves the first version, meaning the truth of the second version remains dubious. These two unreliable narratives are visually represented through flashbacks, challenging the conventional faith in the credibility of what is witnessed, and instead encouraging the audience to question the reliability of all visual recollections of the past presented in the film. This skepticism fosters intense audience anxiety. The film alleviates this anxiety by establishing the credibility of the narrative presented from the perspective of the male protagonist. Similar to the narrative style of most suspense films that eventually reveal the truth, the film finally visualizes a crucial past event involving Yi-Chi: the theft of TWD 2 million from the car struck in the hit-and-run, revealing Yi-Chi's true motivation for investigating the case and restoring a sense of stability to the audience. Linking the truth to the male protagonist implies rationalism and a not entirely negative view of human nature. Using rational judgment, both the audience and the male lead can question the unreliable accounts of past events and understand some of the truth about various crimes. However, the unreliable accounts of events by secondary characters hint at a crisis of trust in contemporary Taiwan. Mr. Qiu, a seasoned journalist and newly appointed Minister of the Interior, intentionally conceals the truth and orchestrates a crime to gain political advantage. This is reminiscent of issues in contemporary Taiwanese society, such as fake news, media chaos, and political corruption. At the end of the film, whether Mr. Qiu or Maggie was the real perpetrator of the hit-and-run remains uncertain, leaving an unresolved mystery.

Additionally, the film employs frequent flashbacks to enhance its narrative structure. These flashbacks see characters like Yi-Chi and Ah Wei recall the events surrounding the car accident. Unlike classic film noir, where retrospective narrative bolsters a sense of fatalism, this film uses flashbacks to contribute to a two-line narrative structure that interweaves past and present. The flashbacks also prompt both the characters and the audience to seek the truth. Fragmented memories that require reconstruction provide both a foundation and motivation for the actions of characters. Contrasting with the focus of classic noir on uncovering "sordid details" (Luhr 2012, p. 4), the memory fragments in this film drive the present actions of the characters. This shift diminishes the sense of fate and de-

spair, focusing instead on anticipation of how past memories influence present decisions. The modifications of the narrative mode of the film depart from the fatalism of classic noir, offering a more dynamic exploration of memory, truth, and the interplay between past and present.

4. Visual Style: A Reference to Film Noir

Classic film noir uses an expressionistic visual style to depict the dark side of urban society and the sinfulness of human nature. In "Notes on Film Noir" (originally published in 1972), film scholar and filmmaker Paul Schrader identified film noir as a cinematic form situated within a specific period of American film history, and sharing common motifs, tone, and atmosphere that transcend history (Schrader 1996). Schrader elaborated on five visual techniques frequently employed in film noir: (1) night-lit scenes; (2) preference for oblique and vertical lines over horizontal ones; (3) concealment of actors within a nocturnal urban tableau, often speaking with their faces obscured by shadows; (4) a preference for compositional tension over physical action; (5) a fascination with water and fog (Schrader 1996, pp. 56–58). Responding to Schrader's focus on the visual style of film noir, Place and Peterson (1996) examine the aesthetic characteristics of film noir, exploring aspects such as photography, lighting, and directors' mise-en-scène. For instance, they point out that such films often employ wide-angle lenses or allow more light to enter the lens to achieve greater depth of field, thus surrounding characters with a sense of desolation (Place and Peterson 1996, pp. 66–67). During the 1970s, rooted in nostalgia for classic film noir, "neo-noir" emerged and persists to this day. These films adopt the aesthetic elements and narrative strategies of their predecessors, and the genre encompasses crime, suspense, and thriller films (Schwartz 2005, p. xi). Ronald Schwartz identifies two new features in the visual style of neo-noir: (1) the utilization of color and widescreen technology; and (2) more use of violence, explicit content, bloodshed, and unsettling scenes (Schwartz 2005, p. xi).

Who Killed Cock Robin adeptly combines visual elements from both classic film noir and neo-noir, shaping an eerie and indifferent urban jungle, populated by characters who are lonely, anxious, and vulnerable to conspiracy. The film favors night scenes, often shot with low-key lighting or backlighting, producing a tonal palette that is generally dark blue or grayish-blue. This color scheme augments the film's eerie, unsettling atmosphere, emphasizing the characters' feelings of haziness, vagueness, mistrust, and insecurity. Most of the scenes use a color palette of blue, gray, dark blue, white, and black, similar to the monochrome tones of classic film noir, both in lighting and characters' attire, depicting the oppression and monotony of urban life. This color palette means that even the daytime scenes feel overcast, creating a sense of coldness and alienation. Despite the film being set during a hot summer in sub-tropical Taiwan, the audience feels no sense of warmth. The film features numerous close-ups of the characters' faces, which are often cast in deep shadows, hinting at the characters' dark psychology and unspeakable secrets. For example, when Mr. Qiu recounts the hit-and-run accident to Yi-Chi, his face is cut by a large shadow, casting doubt on his narrative.

Additionally, lines and frames are extensively used to suggest the characters are trapped in an urban jungle, highlighting their repression, unease, and fear. The preference for skewed and vertical lines over horizontal ones creates a sense of instability. For instance, when Ai-Ting is imprisoned in an apartment building by Ah Wei, a side shot shows her small body cut by the window frame, highlighting her sense of powerlessness. The labyrinthine spaces of this apartment building facilitate the constant use of intersecting lines. As Yi-Chi and two policemen try and fail to find Ai-Ting, their bodies are frequently shot such that they are cut by railings and window frames, making them appear smaller. This intensifies the audience's sense of anxiety and suggests secrets and crime.

The film also appropriates elements of gore and violence from neo-noir, pushing in the direction of sensationalism and commercialism. The most nauseating scene features Ai-Ting's dismembered and exposed body, with the sensational impact of this image far outweighing its narrative function. It is hard to understand why Ah Wei has adopted

such pathological means of retribution, but the imagery clearly draws on gory corpses in Hollywood neo-noir films like *Basic Instinct* (1992) and *The Black Dahlia* (2006). The bloody elements further intensify the audience's fear of urban crime.

The visual style of the film aligns closely with both classic film noir and neo-noir, suggesting the combination of its cosmopolitan characteristics and the tabloidized reporting in Taiwan's media landscape. This may be related to the commercial intentions of the film. Given the globalization of Hollywood film noir, the lack of local films in the noir genre, and Taiwanese audiences' understanding of Hollywood film aesthetics, the complete appropriation of noir visual aesthetics helps increase recognition of the film among Taiwanese audiences. On the other hand, the excessive bloodshed and violence in the film resemble the sensationalist content often presented in Taiwan's media. This contributes to stimulating curiosity among Taiwanese audiences and fulfilling their voyeuristic desires.

5. The Discussion on Its Theme

Both classic film noir and neo-noir encompass dark themes that delve into the sinister aspects of human nature, society, or politics. The film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, exemplified by *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Sunset Blvd* (1950), explores themes of human depravity, failure, despair, urban evil, individual alienation and estrangement, political corruption, and fatalism. These themes challenged the optimism of American society and contrasted sharply with the aspirational values of the American Dream (Belton 2005, pp. 229–31; Luhr 2012, pp. 31–39; Schatz 1981, pp. 172–79). In neo-noir films like *Blood Simple* (1984), *Seven* (1995), *Croupier* (1999), and *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), the spectacle of bloodshed and violence, coupled with modernist narrative techniques, provides visceral visual pleasure to audiences while also intensifying their sense of terror. These films introduce a subversive and malevolent force into the real world, often with a strong anti-utopian element, where evil frequently wins (Naremore 2008, pp. 278–310; Luhr 2012, pp. 289–320). A pervasive pessimism sits at the core of these dark themes. Whether the story involves murder, seduction, or political corruption, such films stoke pessimism and moral anxiety in the audience. Chinese film scholars Deng Shuanglin and Hao Jian also emphasize that a definitive characteristic of film noir is the "sense of despair and gloom presented in the narrative" (Hao and Deng 2015, p. 69).

In *Who Killed Cock Robin*, the central theme of darkness primarily revolves around whether the truth can be ascertained, a widespread concern in relation to Taiwan's current media landscape. The Chinese title *Mujizhe*, translating literally to "witnesses of the truth", underscores this connection. As previously analyzed in relation to the character setting and the narrative mode, the film complexifies the narrative structure by obscuring the characters' true motivations, employing frequent flashbacks, and adopting a multi-perspective narrative, thereby rendering the truth elusive. Whether Mr. Qiu, Maggie, Ai-Ting, or the protagonist Yi-Chi, nearly all the characters are driven by their own economic or power interests, and either fabricate falsehoods or cover up the truth. Such plot settings, closely tied to the professions of the main characters and key supporting roles—journalists (like Yi-Chi and Maggie) and politicians (like Mr. Qiu)—allow us to view this film as a satire and critique of the distorted media ecosystem in Taiwan. Many scholars (Chen 2011; Her 2017; Lin 2008) have observed that Taiwan's media organizations are profit-driven and suffered infiltration by conglomerates or political parties after 1988. This situation has encouraged sensationalist journalism, which erodes journalistic professionalism and ethics, restricts press freedom, and fosters the spread of fake news. Consequently, fulfilling the media's watchdog role in relation to the government has become increasingly challenging. At the beginning of the film, Yi-Chi, much like a paparazzo, shamelessly pries into Legislator Zhang's private life, only to be accused by Zhang of spreading false news. This dynamic satirizes the sensationalism and indifference to the truth of Taiwan's media, which has allowed itself to become a tool for political smearing. As Yi-Chi begins investigating a hit-and-run that occurred nine years earlier, he appears to demonstrate journalistic professionalism and a commitment to uncovering the truth for justice. Ironically, at this point, he

has already been fired by the newspaper. As Yi-Chi continues to uncover the truth behind criminal cases, he also becomes more aware of the ethical shortcomings of those around him (such as Maggie and Mr. Qiu), strengthening both his and the audience's sense of stability and certainty. To some extent, Yi-Chi embodies Taiwanese audiences' idealized expectations of journalists and the optimistic belief that the truth can be uncovered.

However, this optimistic belief is quickly shattered by the subsequent visualizations of bloody violence and Yi-Chi's submission to male authoritarianism. Like neo-noir, the film uses excessive bloodshed and violence, for example deliberately presenting the naked limbless body of Ai-Ting, creating sensory stimulation that far exceeds any social criticism. This visual style resembles the sensationalist presentation of crime cases by the Taiwanese media. On the other hand, on learning the truth, Yi-Chi, to avoid legal punishment (he ultimately kills Ah Wei) and elevate his social status, blackmails Mr. Qiu with a recording and ultimately secures a position as the Director of Public Relations at the Ministry of the Interior. Unexpectedly, Ah Wei reveals that Yi-Chi stole TWD 2 million of ransom money nine years ago. The instant collapse of Yi-Chi's positive image once again triggers audience anxiety. Yi-Chi is no longer seen as a flawed journalist pursuing justice and press freedom, but just another individual corrupted by the "Eastern mentality" of submitting to male authoritarianism, seeking advancement, and complying with the prevailing rules of power and money exchange in capitalist society (Her 2017, p. 195). Yi-Chi's success does not equate to a triumph of justice, as he fails to save Ai-Ting and bring Mr. Qiu to justice for the murder of A-Ji. Instead, Yi-Chi becomes one of Mr. Qiu's exemplary students, learning to navigate the conspiracies and intrigues of Taiwan's media landscape and use them against corrupt politicians such as Mr. Qiu. True to Mr. Qiu's description of Yi-Chi as a "grown-up wolf", he represents an evil new generation, and the film shows his malevolent growth.

The director of this film, Cheng Wei-Hao, similarly focuses on the question of whether truth can be attained in his short film *The Death of a Security Guard* (2014), which satirizes Taiwan's sensationalist and tabloidized media landscape. The film centers on a security guard who dies while patrolling a residential community. His death is widely reported by the media, leading to various online rumors. Some speculate that his demise is related to his homosexual relationships, while others suggest he was possessed by evil spirits. However, no media reports reveal the true circumstances of his death. Eventually, the short film reveals that he merely suffered an accident while challenging himself to jump between neighboring rooftops. The film underscores the director's profound distrust in the ability of Taiwan's media to report the truth, a widespread sentiment in Taiwan. Media distrust has been widespread among the Taiwanese. According to the *Digital News Report 2017* by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 31% of Taiwanese trust the news most of the time, which is lower than the figures for Japanese (43%) and Hong Kong residents (42%) (Newman et al. 2017, p. 20). Moreover, according to the Taiwan Communication Survey (2016) conducted by the Taiwan Ministry of Science and Technology, public trust in media credibility has steadily declined from a score of 60.69 in 2003 to 54.03 in 2014, falling below the passing grade of 60 (crctaiwan.dcat.nycu.edu.tw). Against this backdrop, *Who Killed Cock Robin* (2017) reflects the prevailing Taiwanese sentiment of distrust towards media and pessimism surrounding the accessibility of truth. This suggests that Taiwanese audiences should appreciate both the film's realism and the pessimistic aesthetic common in film noir.

To mitigate the pessimism evoked by the film among Taiwanese audiences, it cleverly incorporates elements of Taiwan's traditional culture into its narrative, thus tempering its noir essence. While the film does not propose ways to fix Taiwan's sensationalist media environment, it presents the inherent kindness of human nature as an imaginative resolution. We should not overlook the influence of Taiwanese elements on the film's meaning and theme. An important recurring image is "Taiwan tea", which is intricately woven into the narrative of the film, deepening the plot and characters. Taiwan tea is clearly associated with divergent metaphors in rural and urban spaces. In the countryside, Taiwanese tea rep-

resents kindness, filial piety, and tradition, as well as Yi-Chi's positive qualities. Yi-Chi, the male protagonist, comes from a rustic family where both parents work in the tea-growing industry and later move to Taipei to study and work. "Tea culture" is initially linked to his rural background. Furthermore, Ai-Ting employs a package of "Eastern Beauty Tea" (東方美人茶) to send the ransom money to her grandmother in the countryside. The use of tea aligns Ai-Ting with her rural upbringing and simultaneously showcases her affection for her grandmother. This display of genuine family sentiment stands out amidst the cold and corrupt city environment. In the city, Taiwan tea symbolizes the illegal exchange of power and money and suggests Yi-Chi's moral decline after moving to the city. Early in the film Yi-Chi visits the police station, attempting to persuade the chief to assist him in retrieving his car's true serial number. This segment features a close-up of Yi-Chi attempting to bribe the chief with "Taiwan tea". Using tea for gifting and bribery is a feature of Taiwan's unique tea culture. The film subtly conveys these contrasting ideas through news tickers, such as "ten years of sinking, the simple and filial son of tea farmers has become lost in the city's big dye vat". This phrase casts Yi-Chi as a young man from the countryside who has been negatively influenced by urban culture. The dichotomy between countryside/kindness/warm colors and city/depravity/dark colors is stark. Director Cheng Wei-Hao even remarks that this is "the way to evil" for Yi-Chi (Weng 2017).

However, the film not only portrays Yi-Chi's moral degradation but also illustrates his act of redemption towards Ai-Ting, suggesting that he has not entirely lost his conscience. After Ai-Ting's demise, Yi-Chi mimics her gifting by himself sending a package of Eastern Beauty Tea to Ai-Ting's grandmother. This time, the package contains TWD 2 million from the ransom, given in an act of atonement to Ai-Ting. Importantly, this positive scene is set in Miaoli (苗栗), Ai-Ting's hometown. Warm and sunny colors dominate, highlighting a sense of village simplicity and camaraderie, and contrasting starkly with the cold and corrupt modern city that dominates the rest of the film. Yi-Chi's actions exemplify his innate goodness: he acknowledges his guilt toward Ai-Ting and seeks to compensate her grandmother and show filial duty on Ai-Ting's behalf. This scene lets the audience perceive Yi-Chi as a complex character who, despite being subjected to authoritarian control, retains a sense of compassion. By highlighting Yi-Chi's kindness and his identity as the son of a tea farmer, the audience is encouraged to sympathize somewhat with his unavoidable choices. Delving into the underlying narrative structure of the film from the perspective of "the way to the evil", we can discern a departure from the conventions of classic Hollywood film noir. Rather than a tale of despair and fate, this film serves as a coming-of-age story for a morally flawed yet successful character, who has not completely lost his conscience. This departure from the classic film noir model, where male protagonists often face punishment, leaves the audience uneasy, attenuating the feelings of fatalism and hopelessness. Perhaps Taiwanese audiences are more inclined towards narratives that end positively for the protagonist, even when that protagonist possesses dark and morally questionable traits. This film not only highlights the dark and sensational aspects of Taiwan's media environment, revealing the widespread distrust many Taiwanese harbor toward the media, and depicting pessimism regarding the potential for improvement within the media ecosystem. However, it also subtly constructs, through the symbolic relationship between "Taiwan tea"—a traditional element—and the protagonist, an imaginative portrayal of a male lead who still embodies human goodness and traditional filial virtues. This serves to soften the noir elements of the film.

6. Conclusions

This article carefully examines the Taiwanese film *Who Killed Cock Robin* as a case study to understand how a Taiwanese film can both utilize and depart from the aesthetics of Hollywood film noir. While assimilating and adapting aesthetic elements from Hollywood film noir, including the character setting, visual style, and narrative mode, the film manages to localize these by introducing more intricate narrative strategies and Taiwanese culture. The film positions itself within Taiwan's widely disparaged media environment,

revealing aspects such as the disregard for truth, fabrication of false news, emphasis on sensationalism, manipulation by conglomerates and political parties, and the absence of social justice. The male protagonist Yi-Chi embodies the classic characteristics of the detective archetype in film noir: loneliness, social marginalization, a debased masculinity, moral flaws, and susceptibility to the *femme fatale*s (Maggie and Ai-Ting); also reflects the "Eastern mentality" of Taiwanese journalists adhering to male authority. Yi-Chi's interactions and conflicts with other key characters (like Maggie, Mr. Qiu, and Ai-Ting) metaphorically symbolize the tumultuous media scene and political strife in contemporary Taiwan, unveiling the pervasive distrust of Taiwanese towards their local media. By intertwining parallel plots across time and space, the film portrays intricate and disjointed relationships between genders and classes by employing multiple plot twists and mysteries. The incorporation of multiple perspectives and frequent flashbacks in the narrative mode implies the uncertainty and unreliability inherent in the storytelling of the film, thereby rendering it less fatalistic and despairing in comparison to classic film noir. In terms of visual style, the film incorporates the typical violence and gore associated with neo-noir, mirroring the sensationalism and tabloidization prevalent in Taiwanese television media. Thus, the film effectively localizes the dark themes and widespread pessimism of film noir, illuminating darker aspects of Taiwan's media landscape and resonating emotionally with Taiwanese audiences.

On the other hand, the film intertwines Taiwan's "tea culture" with the actions of the male protagonist Yi-Chi, highlighting the dichotomy between the countryside and city within Taiwanese society and constructing Yi-Chi's complex personality. The symbolic significance of Taiwan's "tea culture" accentuates Taiwan's societal duality: the tradition/countryside/goodness/warm palette versus the modernity/city/decay/cold palette. This juxtaposition vividly portrays the journey of protagonist Wang Yi-Chi from innocence to corruption. As a journalist, Yi-Chi is first fired by his newspaper, then leverages extortion to enter politics, symbolizing the control of Taiwan's media industry by conglomerates and political parties. The example of Yi-Chi also shows how the independence and dignity of Taiwanese journalists have been compromised, leading them to recover lost social status through compliance with authority and illicit retaliation. Yi-Chi's downfall epitomizes the decline of Taiwan's newspaper industry. However, coming from a tea farming family, his act of sending TWD 2 million to Ai-Ting's grandmother to fulfill a filial duty on behalf of Ai-Ting also signifies his traditional, simple, and virtuous side, symbolizing the traditional virtues still present in Taiwanese rural society. The contradictory symbolism embodied by Yi-Chi possesses cross-cultural qualities, hinting at the mixture of optimism and pessimism that characterizes contemporary Taiwanese society.

In contrast to the punishment of the *femme fatale* in film noir, the film offers a more favorable outcome for women, highlighting the advancement in the social status of Taiwanese women. The two *femme fatale*s, Maggie and Ai-Ting, have different fates. The latter's death is sensationalized and spectacle-driven, reminiscent of the sensationalist portrayal of women's bodies in Taiwanese media. Meanwhile, the former goes unpunished and even secures a higher government position than the male protagonist by the end of the film. Her confident smile at Yi-Chi during a media conference presents a new archetype of the intelligent and capable Taiwanese professional woman, enriching the representation of Asian female characters within the neo-noir genre.

Regarding the film's underlying narrative structure, the film opts for a "happy ending" involving two morally compromised characters. This choice somewhat departs from the despair and pessimism typically found in classic film noir. This choice also reflects the director's ambivalent perspective on Taiwan's media. While the film exposes the darker underbelly of Taiwan media and politics, it also acknowledges that success in the urban landscape often necessitates adapting to ruthless survival strategies. This juxtaposition reflects the director's utilitarian but pessimistic view of Taiwan's media ecosystem. However, the director maintains an optimistic view of human nature within Taiwan's rural society. Through Yi-Chi's act of redemption, the film implies a positive belief that human

conscience can persist in a profit-driven Taiwanese society, which is uncommon in both classic film noir and neo-noir. Ultimately, the film is a product of the cross-cultural aesthetic negotiation between the director's creative vision and the tropes of Hollywood film noir. This crossroads serves as a unique example of how film noir, as a global cinematic genre, manifests within Taiwan's film industry.

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Notes

[1] Please refer to the following works: (1) (Gallagher 2015, pp. 1–17). (2) (Bould et al. 2009). (3) (Yau and Williams 2016). (4) (Naremore 2008).

[2] Although there has been a significant increase in the number of suspense thrillers in 2017, they are still less abundant compared to the high production of romance and comedy films (Taiwan Ministry of Culture 2018, p. 27).

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