

ASIA PROGRAMME

**About**

*Le Temps des mots (Bridging the strait)*

**Interview with Samia FERHAT**

DIRECTOR OF A DOCUMENTARY ON SINO-TAIWANESE RELATIONS

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ASIA FOCUS #26

*Bridging the Strait tells the story of 10 Chinese and Taiwanese students who participated in a workshop from 2009 to 2010. This workshop “Cross-Strait Dialogue on Cinema” (Dialogue sino-taiwanais autour du cinema) was organized by Samia Ferhat as part of her research activities within the Research center on modern and contemporary China (EHESS-CNRS).*

*The workshop’s goal was to start a dialogue between young people from two societies separated by decades of political antagonism and threatened by the risk of military escalation. After 6 months of meetings and discussions, the students wished to continue their exchange by producing a documentary, which allowed them to present this dialogue experience, and to further the confrontation of their ideas.*

*This film reviews the history of the relations between China and Taiwan, by means of archival images and original illustrations, while also allowing the students to voice, openly and without taboo, the problems of identity, politics and memory inherent in the dynamics of these relations. It also raises the question of the efficiency of dialogue, which can create a common space for exchange and interaction, despite often involving misunderstandings and tensions.*

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** YOUR FILM SEEMS TO CONFIRM THAT ONLY A THIRD PARTY (IN THIS CASE FRANCE) CAN PROVIDE YOUNG TAIWANESE AND CHINESE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CONVERSE ON EQUAL TERMS. IS THIS EXTERIORITY, OF YOUR OUTSIDE VIEW ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF YOUTHS FROM A SAME GENERATION, NECESSARY METHODOLOGICALLY SPEAKING?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** In order to create a freer dialogue, it was necessary to give the students a space in which they felt at ease. Exteriority is therefore neutrality: each student was heard and considered as an individual, as unique, rather than as a member of a national, local or ethnic community. The intention was to have their voices heard, yet in order for them to emerge fully and sincerely, the students needed to be sure that their words would be listened to in full, without needing to answer to any particular expectations. Neutrality can also be synonymous of innocence, in the sense that the researcher must accept surprise: their approach is motivated by a desire to know and to understand, he or she must be ready to welcome any possible development. We may never be free from prejudice and or hasty generalizations, but contributing to knowledge requires nevertheless an open mindedness that favors highlighting complexity. What moves me the most in the documentary, and which I became aware of thanks to the reactions of other viewers, is that the students enact the ethics we developed for the workshop “Cross-Strait Dialogue on Cinema” in their words and their attitude. While speech may be free and open, their tone takes into account sensitivities: the students are careful not to hurt or offend the people who are likely to hear them. This demonstrates to what extent it is beneficial to cultivate ability for respect and tolerance.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** YOUR FILM IS BUILT BY CUTTING TOGETHER PERSONAL TESTIMONIES AND ARCHIVE FOOTAGE. HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT EDITING IT?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** It was not easy to define our guidelines. To only show a series of interviews would have been boring, and probably incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with the subject of Cross-Strait relations. We therefore decided to build on two narrative frames, both intersecting and answering each other throughout the film. One follows the history of Cross-Strait relations since 1945, with some clarifications about the colonial period in Taiwan, whereas the second follows the evolution of the students in their understanding of the political, social and identity dynamics that underlie these relations. The challenge was to make visible a collective imagination, or memory, to make tangible anxieties, disappointments, expectations and hopes. We therefore attempted to illustrate sensitive subjects through archival images, drawings, animations, as well as shots that reveal the students' interiority, while simultaneously revealing the complexity and maturity of their thought process.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** IF THIS FILM WERE SHOWN IN TAIWAN, OR EVEN IN CHINA, WOULD YOU CHANGE THE CUT?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** No. However, I would try to present, as clearly as possible, the research project as a whole in which the film originates. I would explain its purpose and I would try to share its meaning, as I see it.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** THE ASSUMPTION THAT ASIAN SOCIETIES ARE AFFECTED BY POLITICAL ANOMIE DOES NOT HOLD UP AFTER VIEWING YOUR FILM. IN FACT, THE STUDENTS INTERVIEWED DEMONSTRATE A REMARKABLE POLITICAL MATURITY AND FEEL VERY MUCH THAT THE ISLAND'S QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY AFFECT THEM. IS THIS A NEW GENERATIONAL FACT? IS THIS POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT SIMPLY CIRCUMSTANTIAL IN YOUR OPINION (THE FACT THAT YOU BROUGHT THEM TOGETHER FOR THIS DIALOGUE PROJECT)?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** Young Chinese and Taiwanese people whom I have met in France, in China or in Taiwan have always seemed to me aware of political issues regarding their country. Those I meet are mostly students who have a taste for discussion and debate and who often are passionate about social, political and economic phenomena. In Taiwan, for example, student movements that marked political life from the early 70s to the Sunflower movement of 2014, including the Wild Lily and Wild Strawberry movements of the 90s and 2000s, show the propensity that young people have for engaging in public matters. However, this does not necessarily mean movements of political protest, but can also take the form of engagement in social, educational, environmental, etc. actions. In China, the political environment certainly leads to very different methods of engagement, more widespread, less obviously rebellious, but which would be interesting to understand.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** IDENTITY AND HISTORY ARE BOTH LABILE. YOUR FILM SHOWS THIS CONTINUOUSLY. AND WHAT THESE TESTIMONIES TELL US ABOVE ALL IS THE SUBJECTIVITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE POSITION THAT EACH CULTURE CULTIVATES ON EACH SIDE OF THE STRAIT. IN OTHER WORDS, THERE IS A JUMBLE OF OPINIONS THAT PROVES THE GREAT DIVERSITY OF THE CHINESE WORLD, THAT EVERYONE RECOGNISES DE FACTO, SHOULD IT SIMPLY BE WITH AN ACCENT OR THAT YOU SPECIFY THE ORIGIN OF EACH PERSON. DOES THE QUESTION OF ORIGIN, EVEN MYTHOLOGIZED, SEEM CRUCIAL TO YOU?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** Origin certainly is important. The students say so many times throughout the film: each group grew up in two very different societies and were shaped by two school systems that promoted different views, if not competing views, of their history. The cultural values instilled in them were just as divergent insofar as they had to support an ideal, a political project specific to the Communist Party on the continent and the Kuomintang in Taiwan. The relationship to the past, to tradition, was not seen in the same way, which would inevitably have an effect on social and human dynamics. However, the distinction is not defined simply by a dividing line separating Taiwanese and Chinese. Diversity exists also within China and Taiwan; it is bolstered by local and linguistic particularities, as well as memory isolates born from specific historical experiences. A young person from a continental family in Taiwan will be raised with a cultural and sensory heritage (culinary practices, local or regional customs and rituals, dialects, etc.) that will separate him from a young person of native Taiwanese or Aboriginal origin. The way in which his family journeyed through the main events of history and the way they passed on that memory affects the process of community identification and, hence, on perception of otherness. This complexity is found in China too: a young person from Manchuria is different in many ways to one in Guangdong, not to mention the socio-cultural factors specific to family environment. But this does not mean that there are no similarities can appear: during the workshop, a student from Shaanxi pointed out that the social customs of the people of Hengchun, presented in the Taiwanese film *Cape N°7* (2008), reminded him of those he knew in his childhood, which are now disappearing. Origin leads us to assume certain cultural and identity traits, but does not make these traits either certain or definitive.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** THE ISLAND'S JAPANESE PAST IS BROUGHT UP SEVERAL TIMES IN THE INTERVIEWS. DOES THIS HISTORY COMPLICATE THE CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONSHIP AND TO WHAT EXTENT?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** As the Chinese students say in the film, the mostly positive view the Taiwanese have of the colonial period and their attachment to Japan can sometimes be seen badly in China. Even though the start of colonization was marked by violence and repression, and during the 30s and 40s Taiwanese activists went to the Continent to join the resistance against Japan, colonial rule nevertheless allowed the development of the island, which benefited a significant part of the local elite. Also, it is not unusual for families to pass on the memory of a rather beneficial time, especially if it is compared by the nationalist rule, which was marked by the brutality of the White Terror from the moment of its inception. Nevertheless, other views tied to a more dramatic experience of colonization also exist in Taiwan. These usually describe Japan as the enemy of the Chinese nation and to condemn the war crimes perpetrated against civilians. Thus, this is closer to the historical memory spread in China since the beginning of the 80s. It is on the basis of this vision of

history that Taiwanese journalists and intellectuals regularly criticize film productions, such as *Cape N°7* (2008) or *Kano* (2014), which, according to them, give a far too positive representation of the Japanese colonizer and his ties to the Taiwanese population. They condemn what they see as a reversal of norms and values, namely the rise of a feeling of nostalgia for the old colonizer, whereas feelings of mistrust and hostility towards China are more and more prominent on the island. Beyond these controversies of memory, there is also the question of Taiwan's role and place within the Asia-Pacific region in a context where China's ambition is to pose as political and military power. It will be interesting to observe over the next few months how Tai Ing-wen's administration, the new president elected last February, will deal with the country's place within a geostrategic dynamic comprising Japan, the United States and India.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** LET'S TRY A LITTLE "COUNTERFACTUAL" HISTORY CHAMPIONED TODAY IN CERTAIN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SCHOOLS. SUPPOSE THAT THE TWO KOREAS SHOULD SOME DAY BE REUNITED OR IN THE NEXT SHORT WHILE PYONGYANG SENDS NORTH KOREAN STUDENTS TO PARIS AND YOU WERE TO INTERVIEW THEM... WOULD YOU KEEP THE SAME APPROACH AND THE SAME CUT YOU DID FOR THIS MEETING OF CHINESE AND TAIWANESE STUDENTS WHO WERE ALSO SEPARATED BY THE CIVIL WAR, THEN THE COLD WAR?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** I would certainly choose the same approach. However, I would work in coordination with colleagues who specialize in Korean studies. To successfully carry out this kind of project, it needs to take place in the participants' mother tongue and that the coordinators are familiar with the country's culture and history. When working on sensitive subjects like collective imaginations and self-representation, it is necessary to be able to both place oneself within and extract oneself from the framework, in order to process the data according to an objective analysis, which relies on different benchmarks, and follows different lines of questioning and interpretation.

**EMMANUEL LINCOT:** YOU ACTED AS MEDIATOR FOR THESE STUDENTS. WHAT DID YOU GAIN FROM THIS EXPERIENCE? DO YOU PLAN TO CONTINUE WITH IT AND, IF SO, IN WHAT MANNER?

**SAMIA FERHAT:** First of all, a great deal of joy. This project was accomplished because the students, my assistants, the cameraman, in all 16 people, trusted me. I also had the support of the EHESS's China Centre (UMR 8173), the Catholic University's Chair of Contemporary China Studies, the Taipei Representative Office and many friends and colleagues in France, China and Taiwan. A lot of people got involved in this project, which made it all the more meaningful and important. The same goes for the documentary, which, without the help and expertise of those around me, Sica Acapo, Wang Shuai, Ruben Lemos, Zhao Qian, Aurélia Martin, Wong Zhi-qi and Vincent Yeh, I could never have achieved. It has given me an even greater interest in collective work, which, despite its slowness and difficulties, brings a lot of satisfaction and allows a much greater quality of the final product. You used the term "mediator", which I find very appropriate. Beyond observing the group interactions and listening to each statement, my role was to act as bridge between these students, but also to

welcome what they had to say, until my presence was no longer necessary for the ties between them to start forming naturally.

I would like to continue this experience by creating workshops with the same model, involving young Chinese, Taiwanese and Japanese. However, this experiment could also be carried out with young French people, and would then involve people of different origins, faiths and socio-economic backgrounds. When I hear my students talk about “Whites”, “Chinese”, “Blacks”, “Arabs”, I think that the question of dialogue is extremely relevant in our society. Even though these youths see each other every day, they are not really meeting on the basis of their singularities. Yet, it seems to me that a thought-out and responsible consideration of otherness is necessary for the creation of a claimed and shared sense of belonging. ■

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