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Exit

Hsiang Chienn, Taiwan 2014

Directed and written by
Hsiang Chienn

Shiang-chyi Chen Ling-tzu

Ming-hsiang Tung ...

Chang Shih-chun,
the hospital patient

Ming-Hua Pai ...

Ling-tzu's Mother-in-Law

An-Shun Yu ...

Ling-tzu's brother-in-law

Alice Tsai-yi Huang Chia-chen

May Hong Co-worker

Chen-Ling Wen ...

Ling-tzu's daughter

Ming-shiou Tsai ...

Clothes company boss

Yu-Yi Lin Night-market boss



Ling's husband, working in Shanghai, has left her behind to carry out familial duties. She calls, but he never answers. Her precocious teenage daughter, Mei Mei, would rather spend time with her boyfriend than talk to Ling. As if this wasn't enough, a sudden diagnosis of early-onset menopause exacerbates her overwhelming loneliness. She is walled in.

During a routine visit to her hospitalised mother-in-law, Ling is captivated by the cries and gasps

of Chang, an eye-banded male patient, whom no one ever visits. She quickly finds a way to ease the pain by wiping his chest with a wet towel. This intimate touch begins to rekindle her dormant desire. How will Ling deal with the dilemma when Chang regains his sight?

Award-winning veteran cinematographer, Chienn Hsiang, presents his debut feature, a claustrophobic portrait of urban life constrained by social conventions.

It is the observant eye of an artist that can see inspiration and beauty in mundane experiences. This is the core essence of the film "Exit" – poetry of the mundane, that deeply connects to the viewer through its sheer universality.

The director Chienn Hsiang is first of all a cinematographer and his reliance on visual elements to tell the story and convey the emotion is evident. Every scene is full of details that contribute to the film, but there are few major ele-

ments. First, the claustrophobic spaces where our main character lives – her home, the hospital, her work place, and the crowded public transport. The scenes beautifully capture these urban spaces, deepening the feeling of urban loneliness, and reminding me of the brilliance of a futuristic L.A. in the classic *Blade Runner*.

Second is the eye, the perspective of viewer. Watching is the essential thing we do with cinema, we need to see to know. But watching is also judging (this is the reason why *Lady Justice* has her eyes covered). And this is what the act of viewing symbolizes in this film. The film is mostly just from two perspectives – Ling fearfully watching the world from sides and corners, and us watching Ling from afar. Only in the intimacy of her home we get to see her closer, but always covered in the shadows of her windowless dwelling place. Whenever someone else looks at Ling, her daughter, or her mother-in-law, it is always with judgment. The eye of the beholder does not see Ling as a full human being. Just as her role in society (or lack of it in this case) further erodes confining Ling into claustrophobic non-existence.

The film viewer, as a silent ever-present spectator, can see Ling in broader spectrum than any of the people in the film. That's why we are able sympathize with her. We observe her trials to gain a new role, to bring herself out of the shell through outside visual changes – the dress and makeup. Her fluctuating feelings between budding self-confidence back to fear and anxiety are so familiar, I think especially among female spectators (like me). Ling's small triumphs and her failures are so human, so common, that it is uncanny sometimes even painful to watch. *Exit* provides such a contrast with today's mainstream films dominated by superheroes. While superheroes are good for escapism, films like *Exit* bring us back in touch with our own reality, our humanity.

The beauty of *Exit* is that without being overly sentimental or lecturing, it reminds us to be kind, as we never know the hard battles a person is fighting in silence.



This seems like a very unlikely subject for a male director. Can you talk a little bit about how you developed this project?

A few summers ago, I was on a bus. There weren't many people on it. A middle-aged woman sat beside me and looked straight ahead with her eyes empty. It was very hot, but she was wearing a coat. I looked at her face, and saw her wrinkles. I thought that she must have been a pretty girl 20 years ago. Then I thought: "Where is that girl?" She must be hiding somewhere inside, because of the age, because of the environment—a shell, layers upon layers. Then I thought about this little girl coming out. What would happen? That's why I wrote this film.

*I think that middle age is the same for men and women: it's the last moment. . . The first two characters in the Chinese title [hui guang] mean that when someone is dying, at the last minute he will become lucid, and die. A direct translation to English would be "returning light." I think the protagonist of *Exit* is at the line before menopause, and before this last-minute moment, she wants to grab something—she's just woken up.*

It's handled very realistically. How did you work on the script?

We did interviews with hundreds of middle-aged women. We asked: "What do you want? What do you think about love? What can you say about desire?" Most of them didn't want to talk about desire, but some of them

were very direct. And [there's] my team: my producer is a middle-aged woman, my costume designer is a middle-aged woman, my main actress is a middle-aged woman. So I had a lot of people around me, showing me what to do. The funny thing is, if I did something politically wrong, everybody jumped on me: chauvinist! We had a lot of discussions, but I think it's the same—a little different [for men], but the same. . .

For instance, the mask: I originally wrote that after peeling off her facial mask, she threw it into the garbage bag. And everyone jumped up: no! This woman, of this social status, will use all of it. She'll rub it on every part of her body. And I thought: "That's beautiful!"

I loved that moment. When you were doing the interviews with women, did they actually say "to me, desire is tango," or was that an element you added?

No, I added that. For me, tango is a very sexy music. And I think tango hides something. . . the inside desire. Especially in Piazzolla's tango. It's so sensational. You can feel the thirst, the heartbeat—everything. I like that.

From an interview with Violet Lucca for filmcomment.com

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS
(Preston Sturges, US 1941)
Monday 19 June