

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

FILM AND TV SCHOOL

MASTER'S THESIS

Prague, 2023

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ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE
FILM AND TV SCHOOL

Masters In Cinematography
Cinematography

MASTER'S THESIS

The Cinematography of Mark, Lee Ping-Bing

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Thesis advisor : MgA. Vidu Gunaratna, Ph.D.

Awarded academic title : Master of Arts (MgA.)

Prague, 2023

AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE
FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

KATEDRA KAMERY
Kinematografie

MAGISTERSKÁ PRÁCE

Mark Lee Ping-Bing a jeho filmy

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Přidělovaný akademický titul : Magistr umění

Praha, 2023

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Abstrakt

Tato diplomová práce zkoumá filmové dílo Marka Lee Ping-Binga, významného tchajwanského kameramana současnosti. Prostřednictvím hloubkové analýzy jeho filmových spoluprací s režisérem Chou Siao-Sienem tato studie ukazuje výraznou estetickou filozofii Marka Leeho, která se týká kinematografie a vizuálního stylu, a to, jak se projevila v jeho spolupracích s různými mezinárodními režiséry, a významně tak přispěla k vývoji filmové estetiky zejména v desetiletích po tchajwanské nové vlně.

Abstract

This dissertation study examines the cinematic oeuvre of Mark Lee Ping-Bing, a prominent Taiwanese cinematographer of great significance in contemporary times. By conducting an in-depth analysis of his film collaborations with director Hao Hsiao-Hsien, this research demonstrates how Mark Lee's distinctive aesthetic philosophy about cinematography and visual style has manifested in his collaborations with various international directors, thus making a substantial contribution to the evolution of cinematography aesthetics, particularly in the decades following the Taiwanese New Wave cinema movement.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The intention of the Thesis: Identify the cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bing's views and approaches to see how his aesthetics of visual style has developed, analyzing his light and camera techniques.

The following thesis focuses on analyzing Mark Lee Ping-Bing's film works of cinematography, starting from the long-term collaboration with the director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, which crossed through decades with ten feature films and one short film. Under the framework of director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's iconic long continuous shot style, to set each decade as a boundary to analyze the evolution of Mark Lee Ping-Bing's cinematography style in different periods. To summarize his consistent views of dealing with director Hou's different story themes and his philosophical thinking on film images.

Since the 1980s, the multi-cooperation with Hou Hsiao-Hsien, who was one of the leading directors of the Taiwanese New Wave cinemas at that time, it can be said that Mark Lee Ping-Bing's cinematography also established the visual style of the Taiwanese New Wave movies in the period. During that time, new-wave directors actively pursued the realism of image style and withstood the political propaganda films of the past. Therefore, Mark Lee had the opportunity to apply his different viewpoints on lighting and colors to Taiwanese New Wave films. Therefore, this thesis discusses the realism of Mark Lee Ping-Bing's cinematography and the lighting approaches during the Taiwanese New Wave cinema era. As well as to compare his works with the breakthroughs in the image style of previous traditional films and the impact on subsequent Taiwanese cinematography.

In addition to filming Director Hou's art films and making his mark at international film festivals, on the other hand, he left Taiwan to work in the Hong Kong film industry by chance in the 1990s. As a result, he started participating in the shooting of commercial action cinema, such as Martial arts films in Hong Kong. This unique shooting experience trained him to become an all-around cinematographer. It was also because of the highly efficient working environment in Hong Kong during this period that he learned to produce high-quality images under various circumstances at any time. It also trained him to develop his flexible cinematography style for different film genres.

Having shooting experience in Hong Kong, Mark Lee had the opportunity to cooperate with the other well-famed director - Wong Kar Wai, to film "In the Mood for Love," which won the Technical Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Furthermore, this film became Mark Lee's stepping stone for future cooperation with international film productions. Subsequently, Mark Lee collaborated with Japanese, French, and other international directors. Based on the summary of his cinematography approach with director Hou's film works in Taiwan, this thesis will also analyze these works that cooperated with international directors and sort out how Mark Lee presents his philosophy of cinema and visual aesthetics in the works with multicultural background film productions.

1.2 The Short biography of Mark, Lee Ping-Bing

Mark Lee Ping-Bing was born in Taiwan in 1954. After graduating from high school and served 3-year of compulsory military service, he took a chance to be admitted to the Central Motion Picture Corporation training course, a state-owned film studio training program, to join the cinematography major. He started working at CMPC film studio as a second camera assistant in 1976 after he finished training and interned in a few feature film productions.

Although nominally working as a camera assistant, he must also participate in the work of other technical departments, such as editing, sound, and art departments. However, at the same time, it also cultivates Mark Lee's understanding of the details of the film production process so that he can team up and communicate more comprehensively when he serves as a director of photography in the future.

His debut as director of photography was in 1981 for the film " Flying knife once again." In the beginning, he was the first camera assistant for this film. However, after a few days of shooting, the original cinematographer could not continue shooting and recommended Mark Lee as an alternative for finishing the work. Without preparation, he was promoted to cinematographer and made his first film. In addition to working as a feature film cinematographer, during this period, he also served as a documentary cameraman in charge of shooting the work assigned by the film studio.

In 1982, Mark Lee shot the film " Run Away," combining the style of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting into the film. With his innovative martial arts genre image style, he won his first Best Cinematography Award at the Tokyo Asia Pacific Film Festival. Then, starting in the 1980s, he began to participate in shooting many classic Taiwanese movies. Especially the long-term collaboration with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien created ten feature films together for over thirty years: many of these films were nominated at the Cannes Film Festival main competition and awarded.

The turning point of his career was in the late 1980s when he was asked to terminate his shooting job as a cinematographer in Hong Kong and go back to his belonging CMPC film studio in Taiwan. However, despite there still being ten days of shooting till the wrap-up, he was asked to return to Taiwan immediately without any reason; therefore, he insisted on finishing the shooting and resigning from the CMPC film studio, where he worked for twelve

years.

Thus, he began his next ten-year career in the Hong Kong cinema industry. It also opens his opportunity to move towards cooperating with international production shooting in the future. During this period, he cooperated with directors worldwide, such as the Hong Kong directors Wong Kar Wai and Ann Hui, the Vietnamese-born French director Tran Anh Hung, Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda and French director Gilles Bourdos, and so forth.

In his film career, many international film festivals have awarded and honored Mark Lee's cinematography works. He is the seven times winner of the Golden Horse Award for Best Cinematography, which is the highest honor in the Chinese film industry. In addition, the Hong Kong film "In the Mood for Love" won the Technical Grand Prize at the 2000 Cannes film festival. Most recently, the Chinese film "Crosscurrent" won The Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution for Cinematography at the 2016 Berlinale. The French production film "Renoir" was nominated for the American Society of Cinematographers Spotlight Award in 2013 and the 39th César Awards for Best Cinematography in 2014. These honors have also established his reputation in the film industry.

With his realistic and poetic cinematography style, he was awarded a special honor award and honored as "A Poet of light and shadow" by the "Films from the South" Festival in Oslo, Norway, in October 2007. In June 2016, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York held Mark Lee's cinematography art retrospective exhibition, which was also the first exhibition held by MoMA for Asian cinematographers.

2. The collaboration with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien

Every time he took me to the cliff's edge and kicked me down, asking me to survive and figure out what to do. [1]

– Mark, Lee Ping-Bing

The "he" in this sentence refers to director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and this summarizes their deep and long-term cooperation relationship. Mark Lee has worked with him in over ten movies spanning thirty-five years, starting from their first collaboration movie, "A Time to Live, A Time to Die¹," in 1985. Together with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Mark Lee has built up his unique image style. This chapter aims to analyze Mark Lee's cinematography works with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien through different decades to reveal his cinematography style and approach development.

2.1 The 1980s – The first collaboration film: “A Time To Live, A Time To Die”

The film "A Time to Live, A Time to Die" is based on director Hou's childhood memories. It simply narrates the story of the family's growth after moving from mainland China to Taiwan and experiencing the deaths of the father, mother, and grandmother during that period. The story is set in southern Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s when most families were generally poor after the Second World War.

When Mark Lee thought about the film's lighting, the first image that came to his mind was dim and dark. Electricity was not widely available then, and electricity bills were costly. To save money, most families only turned on the lights if it was dark and would turn them off immediately when leaving the room. Even with the lights on, the space was still dim and gloomy. The most common light sources in living spaces at that time were 5-, 25- or 40-watt tungsten

¹ Directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, DOP Mark, Lee Ping-Bing, 1985 Taiwan.

light bulbs, and they were just slightly brighter than candlelight.

These kinds of dark and rough textures portray daily life in Taiwan then. Based on this perspective, Mark Lee tried to deal with the film's lighting according to his childhood memories and feelings.[2] He aimed to mimic reality as closely as possible and present the atmosphere of living details from the 1950s. Therefore, he did not use the traditional lighting method and abandoned the large-wattage lighting gear, also known as professional equipment. In his opinion, every space has its distinctive ambiance through natural light, just as every person has unique characteristics. The traditional over-saturated lighting would kill the original atmosphere of the space, even though it may look good. Therefore, he aimed to keep the lighting authentic to touch the audience.

I sensed that there was something inside the dark, a deeper layer of darkness underneath the dark.

The multiple layers also serve to heighten the drama of the film. [2] – Mark, Lee Ping-Bing

Mark Lee has created dim light aesthetics in his film productions before. He started exploring and liking the detailed expression of darker textures in his previous film production, "Run Away²." After this successful shooting experience, he gained more confidence to implement this aesthetic idea in his lighting designs. In the 1980s, shooting with only natural light and practical light bulbs in living areas as the key light source on set was a risky and bold choice. High-speed sensitivity filmstock was unavailable then, making it difficult to capture images easily in low-light conditions without fill light to enhance the minimum exposure value. This aesthetic choice can be seen in the following screenshot sequences from the film. In the lighting design of the interior night scene, we can still see plenty of details in the scene and the acting, despite the low-key dimmed light conditions.

² Directed by Wang Tung, DOP Mark, Lee Ping-Bing 1984 Taiwan



sequence 1

In sequence 1 of the shots above, we can see that only a small table lamp is lighting up the scene, with its light reflecting on the glass on the wall and the mosquito net, creating a multi-layered space within the frame. While the shots are not clearly visible, we can still capture the mood of the drama, even though the actor is in a low-light silhouette. The performance details are still visible, such as the tears around the actress's eyes and the wind from the young daughter waving the cattail-leaf fan. The audience can interpret the artistic conception from the images.

In the other sequence of shots, the lighting changes to hint at the coming tragedy. There is a sudden power outage at home, and the only light bulb goes out. When the young daughter checks the room, she must find candles to illuminate the room, only to discover that her father has passed away. This static shot combines the actors' *mise-en-scène* with the lighting change. From the stills below, we can see that when the light bulb goes off, the image turns almost black, with only a little bluish moonlight visible in the background window.



sequence 2

From observation, although the actors' movements in the dark image are somewhat vague, the character's motivation and mood can still be inferred through the voice-over and the dramatic shadows created by the candlelight. This implicit expression method effectively intensifies the audience's emotional response to the character's sudden death in the film. Besides the dramatic interpretation, what impressed the most was the excellent combination of lighting and actors' actions to create a compelling atmosphere that emphasizes the plot. As the first film, Mark Lee attempted to use as much natural lighting as possible and utilized one or two 1.2K wattage HMI lights for the broad range night scene background when necessary.

In the interior day scenes of this film, most of the shots were directed toward the external window to take advantage of the natural sunlight as backlight, creating a stark contrast in the lighting ratio between the exterior and interior. Although Mark Lee later commented that he may have overexposed the external scenes to resemble a bright summer day, some film critics argue that this effect aligns with the author's psychological state when recollecting his teenage years. [3] The accompanying stills demonstrate how Mark Lee balanced the exposure with the natural light.



screenshots

Due to the limitations of natural light in film shooting, a cinematographer must pay close attention to the situation on the scene, such as the weather changes that can affect lighting and shadows, and consider the relationship between the actor's performance and the surrounding space. It is not just about technical problem-solving but also adapting to the circumstances at any time and anywhere. This unique approach also involves close collaboration with Director Hou. While capturing images with a camera alone may be

straightforward, creating images that resonate with the audience requires a more significant effort. If the cinematography is only superficially bright and dramatic, moving and touching the audience's hearts is challenging. Therefore, the cinematographer should aim to create a specific atmosphere, color, and texture for the film through light and shadow, employing cinematic language and the camera to capture the artistic essence and fully immerse the audience in the story.

2.2 The 1980s – The second collaboration film: “Dust in The Wind”³

"Dust in the Wind" is the second collaboration between Mark Lee and Hou Hsiao-Hsien, inspired by co-screenwriter Wu Nien-Jen's childhood memories. The film is the final installment in Director Hou's "Coming-of-Age Trilogy"⁴, which features the coming-of-age stories of three prominent Taiwanese screenwriters. The film is heavily influenced by the film style of Japanese master Yasujirō Ozu⁵ and the Italian neo-realism film style, which inspired screenwriter Wu Nien-Jen. The story follows a young couple leaving their small mining town to seek their fortunes in Taipei in the 1960s. Despite their devotion to each other, their relationship is strained by the challenges of life, work, family, and military service.

The movie's motif centers around the passage of time. The scenery remains unchanged, but people and things have changed. Nevertheless, there is still a glimmer of hope in life and a faint light at the end of the tunnel. To convey the film's artistic concept visually, Mark Lee employed static shots of the scenery with variations in natural light and shadow to convey the underlying mood of the story. These static shots played an essential narrative role in the film.

³ Directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, DOP Mark, Lee Ping-Bing, 1986 Taiwan.

⁴ Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien's "Coming of Age" trilogy includes the three films: A Summer at Grandpa's (1984), A Time to Live, A Time to Die (1985), and Dust in the Wind (1986).

⁵ Yasujirō Ozu (1903-1963), a Japanese film director and screenwriter. The most prominent themes of Ozu's work are family and marriage, and especially the relationships between generations. His most widely beloved films include Late Spring (1949), Tokyo Story (1953), and An Autumn Afternoon (1962).

In the film, light symbolizes "time." The opening and ending shots perfectly encapsulate the film's primary theme. The opening shot features mountain scenery created by the camera setup on a passing train locomotive. The shot conveys the train's rhythm as it enters and exits tunnels, shuttling between light and darkness. The ending shot is an extreme-wide angle static scenery shot where the light shines through the clouds onto the top of a mountain hill, gradually changing as the clouds drift by. Through the changes in light and dark in the environment, the film showcases the powerlessness of destiny through natural phenomena that humans cannot control. [4]



the opening shots sequence of "Dust In The Wind"

The opening shots of a film are crucial in setting the tone and introducing the audience to the story's key elements. In this film, the two protagonists' first sighting occurs as the train passes through a tunnel. Typically, the actors must be clearly visible to the audience in such shots. Therefore, the fill light is usually set to achieve this goal, ensuring that the correct exposure is maintained as the train moves from light into darkness.

However, Mark Lee had a different vision for this particular scene. He believed that it was not imperative to have a clear view of the actors' faces in the dark, and instead, he chose to focus on the lighting changes that occur as the train passes through the tunnel. In doing so, he created a sense of dramatic tension that allowed the audience to imagine the emotional state of the characters.

To achieve this effect, Lee made the picture completely black as the train entered the tunnel, leaving the audience to interpret the shifting lighting on the actors' faces. This decision was a departure from the traditional approach but created a powerful and memorable moment in the film.



The shot sequence of the characters on the train.

In this film, Mark Lee aimed to maintain the same lighting aesthetic as in the previous work while emphasizing the scenery's importance as a critical element. It is a significant departure from "A Time To Live, A Time To Die," in which the setting played a less prominent role in the narrative. The scenery in this film provides crucial information to the story. It serves as a visual representation of the character's inner turmoil as the protagonist transition from the urban workplace to their hometown in the countryside. The absence of dialogue in these scenes allows the audience to focus on the characters' emotional state as they grapple with the weight of their experiences.

Additionally, the wide-angle townscape shots serve as a means of conveying the joys and sorrows of the world from an omniscient perspective. By presenting these scenes in a way that captures the full breadth of the landscape, the director can provide a more comprehensive view of the characters' experiences and the world in which they live. This approach is particularly effective in conveying the story's emotional depth and eliciting a strong response from the audience.



The scenery shots sequence

The original shot list for this film included plans for around twenty more static scenery shots to be used in the ending montage edit. These shots would have featured a range of locations, from deserted mining areas to quiet suspension bridges, trains entering and leaving tunnels, and wild grass.

However, during one day of filming, Mark Lee noticed a beam of sunlight shining through the overcast sky in the distance and falling on the top of a nearby hill, looming with the wind. This

unexpected scene perfectly aligned with the film's concept, and Mark Lee wasted no time asking his camera assistant to set up the camera and capture the moment. The resulting shot ran for 400 ft, lasting around four and a half minutes, and was later edited as the film's ending shot, as he guessed.[5]

As Mark Lee noted, such poetic shots are often the result of chance and must be recognized and captured by those who are prepared to see them. The ancient Chinese landscape painting technique of blank leaving inspired the concept of scenery shots in this film. Rather than directly expressing itself, this technique aims to convey the relationship between human beings and space, with characters' inner emotions conveyed through images.

This film touches on some of the deepest layers of human nature's shared memory through abstract visions and powerful visual imagery. The director has created an emotionally resonant and visually stunning work by weaving together a narrative that combines traditional storytelling techniques with innovative cinematography and visual design.



The ending shot of Dust in the Wind

There were two primary reasons why the films "A Time to Live, A Time to Die" and "Dust in the Wind" needed to rely on solid naturalistic cinematography and lighting aesthetics to transcend outdated narrative methods.

The first reason was practical: due to limited budgets and minimal equipment support from the production companies, Mark Lee had to find ways to create compelling visuals with a straightforward lighting setup. So, he experimented with various techniques for controlling natural light and using inexpensive consumer-level lighting sources to achieve the desired effect.

The second reason was related to the fact that many of the actors in these films were non-professionals. During his first experience shooting with amateur actors in "A Time to Live, A Time to Die," Lee realized that complex lighting setups and camera settings could be distracting and nerve-wracking for non-professional actors. So, he simplified the equipment settings as much as possible to enable them to perform more naturally and focus on their scenes without interruption.

For Mark Lee, the priority for cinematographers should always be to help actors perform their roles effectively and expressively rather than solely focusing on creating aesthetically beautiful lighting setups. Sometimes, the scenery and lighting in a scene can already set the tone for the story. The most crucial task for a cinematographer is to capture the actors' spirited performances on screen. Mark Lee created films that transcended traditional narrative methods and achieved enduring success with audiences by prioritizing the actors' needs and providing them with a comfortable and supportive environment.

2.3 The 1990s – “Flowers of Shanghai”

"Flowers of Shanghai" was the fifth collaboration between Mark Lee and director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. After working for more than a decade at CMPC studio, Mark Lee left in 1988 and started working in Hong Kong during the golden age of the Hong Kong film market. Unlike Taiwan movies, Hong Kong art movies at that time had fewer audiences and no market, resulting in

the majority of Hong Kong movies being martial arts or action movies geared towards commercial market orientation. Hong Kong also developed unique shooting techniques for these genres. Due to his experience shooting in Hong Kong, Mark Lee was exposed to a different humanities and cultural heritage and learned the unique Hong Kong martial arts film shooting techniques.

In the late 1980s, Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci shot "The Last Emperor⁶" in Beijing, and director of photography Vittorio Storaro's cinematography in the film inspired Mark Lee. Its bold use of color was distinct from prior Chinese imagery and imbued color with meaning. As a result, Mark Lee began experimenting with different color filters and test negatives when shooting, attempting to create a similar "colored tone" in his work.

During his decade-long stint in Hong Kong, Mark Lee continued to collaborate with Director Hou on other films in the 1990s, including "The Puppetmaster⁷," "Goodbye South, Goodbye⁸," and "Flowers of Shanghai." These films departed from Hou's melancholic nativist literary movies shot in the 1980s. In terms of cinematography, the previous two films had a colored black-and-white look with low-key, desaturated lighting, shadows, and contrast. [6]

However, the themes of Hou's films in the 1990s gradually shifted. "The Puppetmaster" and "Flowers of Shanghai" were based on the late Qing Dynasty as the backdrop for their stories. Mark Lee believed that a more diverse color palette was needed to recreate genuine antiquity scenes in the films. As a result, Director Hou's films became more colorful, and these works have influenced the aesthetics of other Taiwanese cinematography. As a result, the use of color in Taiwanese films has become more enriched.

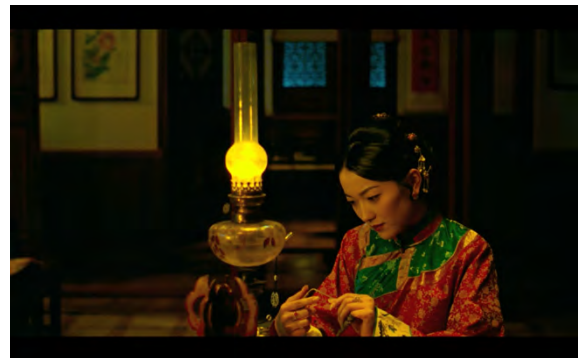
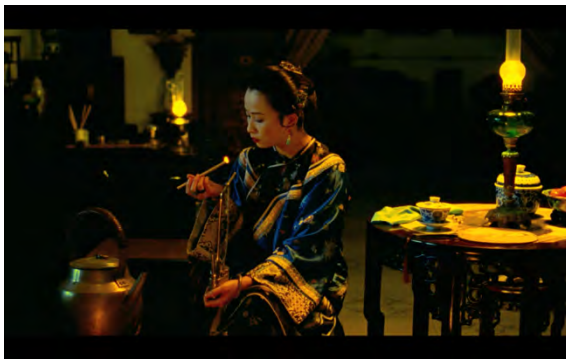
⁶ Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, DOP Vittorio Storaro, 1987 Italy

⁷ Directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, DOP Mark, Lee Ping-Bing, 1993 Taiwan

⁸ Directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, DOP Mark, Lee Ping-Bing, 1996 Taiwan

"Flowers of Shanghai" was adapted from a 19th-century traditional novel in chapters that Han Bang-Qing wrote. The story is set in the 19th-century British concession in Shanghai, where many luxurious "flower houses" are reserved for the city's elite. Chinese dignitaries are not allowed to frequent brothels, so these establishments are the only places they can visit. The men go to the houses to see the courtesans, dine, smoke opium, play, and relax, while the women there are known as the "flowers of Shanghai."

At the outset, the director envisioned the cinematography of "Flowers of Shanghai" to have a golden-yellow oil painting texture to capture the luxurious feasting scenes. Since there were no electric lamps in China at the end of the 19th century, people used oil lamps for illumination, which meant that the lighting and shadows would change with the movement of people. In addition, the silk clothes of the benefactors and courtesans would reflect a remarkable texture under the oil lamps.



The stills of "Flowers of Shanghai", show the golden-yellow oil painting texture.

While filming "Flowers of Shanghai," director Hou felt that Mark Lee's cinematography was too beautiful and unrealistic. To address this, director Hou turned off the artificial lights and insisted that the only light source on set should be oil lamps or candlelight. However, shooting with only oil lamps would make it impossible to achieve the oil painting quality of the image. The low illumination for the film stock exposure would not be enough. The candlelight excessively enlarges the actors' shadows, creating a spooky atmosphere that conflicts with the director's original vision. Therefore, Mark Lee convinced the director that the lights used in the scene were all natural and recreated to mimic natural light sources. Although this approach resulted in a more beautiful image than it is, it was still realistic, which Mark Lee referred to as "Beautified Realism." [6]

In the movie, all the scenes were filmed indoors. Based on historical research on the establishments of the late Qing dynasty in the 19th century, the art department constructed four rooms with white walls in the studio. However, the reflective nature of the white walls made it difficult to shoot the scenes. To overcome this challenge, the lighting team reduced the intensity of the light to create a hazy effect on the walls and used shadows to soften the brightness.

Mark Lee asked the gaffer to create a hole in the middle of the depron sheet and seal it around to create a natural-looking effect. Through this hole, a spotlight was directed on the oil lamp on the table, creating reflections on the actors. Additionally, CTB gels were used to wrap the leaking light behind the spotlight. This bluish scattered light helped create various tones on the surrounding white walls.

The camera movement in "Flowers of Shanghai" is another defining aspect that contributes to its unique visual narrative. The film features only thirty-three shots in total, with nearly one shot per scene. The author's narrative perspective in the original novel invites the reader to become

a participant in the story, watching from a distance without any subjective prejudices. The characters in the story engage in everyday conversations, and none of the dialogue serves as a pivotal point. Instead, it is presented like a puzzle. Through a limited third-person viewpoint, the audience slowly unravels the relationships and conflicts between the characters, ultimately uncovering the innate themes and spirit of the story.

At the beginning of the production, director Hou planned to stick to his usual style, which consisted of long, static wide shots combined with actors' mise-en-scène for each scene. However, Mark Lee suggested using dolly shots with the camera panning to achieve the "third-person point of view" of visual narrative as depicted in the original novel. In this film, the dolly shots are not used for dramatic purposes but to follow the actors' actions and dialogues motifs. The camera assumes the role of a "participating character" in the film, especially evident in the opening banquet scenes. The camera methodically pans back and forth between the speaker and other objects of interest, constantly reminding the viewer that it is spatially positioned within the scene itself. This unspoken yet present observer is "animated" and always "reminds the audience of its limitations in the field of vision."

The existence of every scene has its focus, not the focus of the picture, but the focus of the dramatic content.

If a scene does not have the focus of the content, it is just a cutscene. – Mark, Lee Ping-Bing



The opening shot sequence of "Flowers of Shanghai"

As an example, the opening shot sequence above in "Flowers of Shanghai" is an eight-minute continuous shot that observes people conversing one after another at the banquet. However, the camera does not solely follow the speaker but also captures the expressions and reactions of other characters, allowing the story to be presented outside the screen. The slow movement of the dolly shot throughout the scene simulates the audience's close participation as if viewers were at the banquet watching everyone. As they listen to the chat on the sidelines, the audience is prompted to question the relationship between the characters, further building up the drama's atmosphere and hinting at the upcoming storyline.

After the production of "Flowers of Shanghai," Mark Lee frequently employed dolly shots in his subsequent film works, which can be considered one of his hallmarks in cinematography.

2.4 The 2000s – “Millennium Mambo”

In the film "Millennium Mambo," the director Hou's subsequent work that entered the millennium shows the urban love story of young people in the early 21st century. With his imagination of the future, Mark Lee wanted to create a "digital" movie with negatives. However, at that time, the concept of "digital" was merely a guess, evoking a cold and metallic sensation. This film is the sixth collaboration between Mark Lee and Director Hou, with Mark Lee constantly exploring new forms of pictures to match the director's different story genres. During the preproduction stage, he suggested to the director and producer to experiment with those failed cinematography elements that were usually considered flawed and unprofessional, such as shaky camera movements, TV scan lines, flickering lights, and some eccentric colors. These concepts were his vision of the images in the future digital era.

The story's background is set in 2001, with the heroine Vicky's story told from the "future" 2011. She is torn between two men with vastly different personalities and is trying to escape from her controlling boyfriend, Hao-Hao. Despite her attempts, she returns to him after he begs for forgiveness. Eventually, she sets a deadline to end the relationship - when the NT\$500,000 in her bank account is depleted. However, she remains in emotional turmoil and uncertainty about her future, feeling lost and hesitant. The love stories of the young characters in the film reveal the anxieties and urban alienation of the Millennium generation.

The film's plot, characters, and cinematography are akin to a stream of consciousness. The story follows the voiceover of the protagonist Vicky, with numerous discontinuous scenes and personal memories depicted through interior shots, disrupting the narrative's linear timeline.

Although director Hou's signature long-take continuous shot remains unchanged in "Millennium Mambo," there are noticeable differences in camera movement and focal length compared to his previous works. In this film, longer focal lengths with a shallow depth of field were chosen for the shots, framing the character's 1/4 side face in the composition. In addition, the camera movement is mostly continuous without any editing, unlike the various dolly shots used in "Flowers of Shanghai." The camera position in "Millennium Mambo" is stationary. However, more close-up shots pan, tilt and shift focus to capture the characters' dynamics, creating a suffocating sense of claustrophobia in the small urban space. This visual style adds candor to the film's central theme: the protagonist's inability to escape her abusive boyfriend.



The screenshots of the studio apartment and pub scenes

The film's primary color tone is abrasive neon, textured with smoky and flashing beams representing the city's wild nightlife. However, the colors used in the cinematography are more daring and vibrant. Whether it is the multicolored and saturated neon lights flickering in the protagonist's nightclub or the ornamental lamps in the heroine's studio apartment, the colors flood the enormous Taipei nightlife scenes with seemingly disharmonious tones. As a result, the image appears murky and blurred, evoking a sense of restlessness and unease in the viewers.

A more nuanced observation that can be made about Millennium Mambo is how it effectively conveys the inexorable passage of time through its cinematography, surpassing what mere

words can articulate. The film's stylistic approach to cinematography is exemplified and established by its iconic opening shot.

In this shot, the camera floats behind Vicky, the lead character, as she walks unencumbered and weightless through an enclosed nocturnal skywalk. Overhead fixtures cast a bright neon-blue light, saturating the scene, while the narrow space takes on a spiral effect that reinforces the notion of following the arc of Vicky's impulses. She gazes out at the city around her through arched slots before turning to look back at the viewer, breaking the fourth wall and looking beyond them to where she came from. Eventually, the camera halts, and Vicky leaves us at the top of a flight of stairs as she continues her journey.

Stopping the camera intimates something significant: the frame does not constrain Vicky's world, the scene's duration, or the film's narrative in either direction. Instead, the film continues moving forward in time while simultaneously returning to a past that viewers have yet to witness. This shot imbues the film with a greater sense of authenticity and realism.



The opening shot sequence of "Millennium Mambo."

The opening shot sequence mentioned above includes deliberate cinematography elements that might seem like "mistakes" at first glance. These include the actor's unsmooth slow motion, the flickering color-shift fluorescent tube caused by the inconsistent shutter frequency, and the slightly trembling Steadicam shot. Although these effects may appear technical errors, they were intentionally arranged to convey the characters' emotions and serve a dramatic purpose. In addition, mark Lee originally intended to take a risk and step outside his comfort zone, knowing that repeating habitual experiences could not result in new and innovative work. As a result of these attempts, the opening shot of Millennium Mambo leaves a lasting impression on the audience.

Mark Lee employed three methods to capture this shot and achieve the expected effect. He used a custom-made rig to fix the camera for the first two attempts, which camera assistants carried behind the actor to shoot. However, after multiple trials, the footage turned out to be too shaky to convey the acting emotions accurately. So, for the third attempt, Mark Lee requested a Steadicam. However, he did not want the shot to appear too standard and stable as a regular smooth Steadicam shot, so he operated the Steadicam himself for this scene, even though a professional Steadicam operator was present on set.

Mark Lee's Steadicam operation may be flawed like an un-professionals, but it creates a unique and distinct image. Although he cannot be entirely confident of the atmosphere he will create in the shot, he strives to look for and feel what images will be suitable during the shoot.

This film is unique in terms of lighting and color design due to the use of many fluorescent colors produced by neon lights. However, the unbalanced composition of these vivid fluorescent colors results in an unexpected, strange, and violent look.

For most of the nightclub scenes shooting, to capture the authentic carnival atmosphere of the nightclub scenes in the movie, Mark Lee required the nightclub owner to keep the venue open as usual and avoid disturbing the guests during filming. To preserve the natural state of the revelry, Mark Lee chose to use a telephoto-length lens to take shots from a distance and in secret.

Since the nightclub scenes were very dark, it was difficult to expose the negatives properly. However, the space's unique atmosphere was why guests came to the nightclub. To avoid breaking this atmosphere and the neon light effect of the space, Mark Lee chose not to use high-wattage lighting equipment to brighten the scene.

In the end, Mark Lee decided to use a small 200-watt Dedolight mounted on the aisle ceiling where the guests would pass by. The lighting looked very natural, and the guests did not notice anything unnatural about the light. Interestingly, when someone walked under the light, the reflection of the Dedolight would shine on their face, creating a flickering light effect that fits well with the authentic atmosphere of the nightclub. The camera followed the characters around this small spotlight to create variations of light and shadow by using a straightforward lighting setup with a telephoto lens. The lighting was combined with the diverse colors of the neon lights in the nightclub, and the little light spot highlighted the dark background of the crowd's reckless revelry.



The screenshots of nightclub scenes with Dedolight mounted on the ceiling.

2.5 The 2010s – “The Assassin”

"The Assassin" is a remarkable film created through the latest collaboration of Mark Lee and director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. It was selected as an official film in the main competition section at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, and director Hou was honored with the Best Director award.

The story takes place in 9th-century China and follows the journey of Nie Yin-Niang, a young girl who was abducted by a nun and trained in martial arts to become an exceptional assassin. Her mission is to eliminate cruel and corrupt local governors. However, after a failed task, Nie Yin-Niang is sent back to her birthplace to confront her family, memories, and long-repressed feelings. She must choose between breaking the order or sacrificing the man she loves.

Martial arts films are a unique genre of action movies in Asia, and "The Assassin" is no exception. Directors such as Ang Lee⁹ and Wong Kar-Wai¹⁰ have each constructed their own martial arts movie world, and "The Assassin" provides a fresh perspective on the appearance of the 9th-century Tang Dynasty. The crew shot real scenes in mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan instead of setting up a studio to provide a more realistic and natural look. By using black and white traditional landscape ink paintings as a reference, Mark Lee could convert these locations to ancient period scenes more realistically and distinctively.

From the blank-leaving concept of scenery shots in Mark Lee's early films, we can see that his aesthetic point of view and the concept of images have transformed from traditional Chinese calligraphy and ink painting for a long time. Once, he wrote an article for a movie magazine discussing "Black and White" in ink painting. [7]

⁹ Ang Lee (1954-) is a Taiwanese film director. Directed Martial Art movie "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" won 73rd Academy Awards for the Best Foreign Language Film.

¹⁰ Wong Kar-Wai(1958-) is a Hong Kong film director, screenwriter, and producer. Directed Martial Art movie "*The Grandmaster*."

In the article, Mark Lee pointed out that traditional Chinese art forms such as calligraphy, landscape painting, and inscription art have not beyond the concept of "Black and White." This concept is embodied using **blank space leaving** and **color contrast**.

In calligraphy or landscape ink painting, "blank space leaving" refers to intentionally leaving a portion of the image or keeping a section of the image extremely minimalistic, in order to draw the viewer's attention to the main subject or object. "Blank space leaving" typically refers to the blank area of the image, but it can also refer to any area of the artwork. In photography, "Blank space leaving" is an important visual design technique that can make the image more visually appealing, and more likely to catch the viewer's interest and attention. It helps to balance the elements of the photograph, and enhances the beauty and purity of the image, while also creating a sense of tranquility and ethereality.

Mark Lee often appreciates specific artworks, especially the black-and-white texture in Chinese ink paintings. He believes that the various contrasting levels produced by black and white require extreme blackness to highlight and express the effect of white. Therefore, black must be full, and white must be heavy. Here, his aesthetic viewpoint of "Black and White" highlights an important concept in traditional Chinese art that inspired contemporary art creators.

While filming "The Assassin," Mark Lee referenced the artworks of two ink painters, Li Keran¹¹ and Fu Baoshi¹². Both are black and white ink painting experts but with different unique styles. Li Keran's ink painting style emphasized complete blackness and heavy whiteness, while Fu Baoshi's style was more unrestrained and wilder, presenting a sense of vastness and

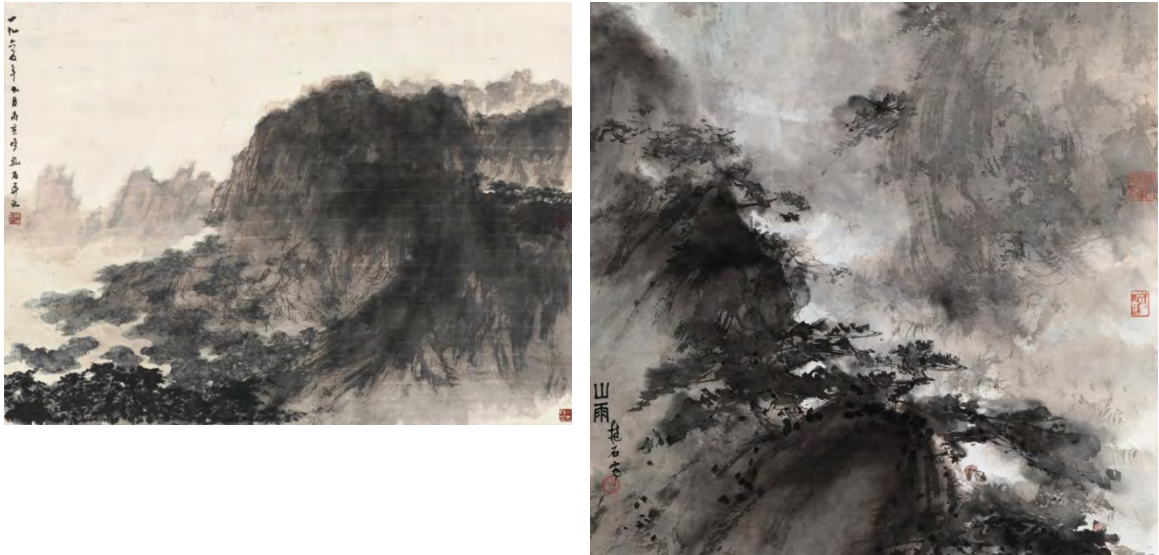
¹¹ Li Keran (1907-1989) was one of the essential Chinese painters and contemporary artists of the 20th century. He received training in both Western oil painting and traditional Chinese ink painting. He blends these two vastly different painting techniques when creating his works, resulting in finely crafted compositions.

¹² Fu Baoshi (1904-1964) was a renowned contemporary Chinese painter and art historian.

magnanimity. In the end, Mark Lee decided to merge the two artists' styles to create the atmosphere in the movie. Although Mark Lee took both masters' works as reference, he also emphasizes that in following masters, we should not imitate their techniques but deeply understand the connotations and thinking behind them and learn to apply their methods to create our unique style and thinking.



Li Keran's ink paintings, Left : 千巖競秀萬壑爭流(1978) Right : Waterfall In Tiers



Fu Baoshi's ink paintings, Left : 韶山 Shaoshan Right : 山雨 Mountain Rain

In the movie, many scenes resemble ink paintings. In addition to the inherent charm of the scenes, the scenes were captured by waiting for the right conditions, such as suitable wind, clouds, and moisture, to capture a picture-like scene with the camera at the right moment, much like a landscape painting.

For example, in the movie's final scene, where the protagonist bids farewell to her master on a mountaintop, the original shooting plan was to film the scene elsewhere, but the image result was unsatisfactory. However, while shooting other scenes, Mark Lee noticed the mountain fog's slow rise. He immediately suggested that the director use it to express the story's emotional atmosphere, resulting in the perfect scene of the character within natural clouds floating captured by the camera.



The screenshot sequence of the final scene.

Hou Hsiao-Hsien is a director with a unique style. His directing is full of improvisation, where the script only serves as a guide to explore the possibilities on set. He decides what to shoot in the present moment based on his powerful intuition rather than pre-planned ideas. The script does not determine the framing and camera movement, nor are they executed to serve the script's needs. Therefore, relying on the script to decide what is important or what should be ignored is impossible.

Hou Hsiao-Hsien's filming style generates maximum "energy" based on the various conditions on set. However, this "energy" is an abstract concept that is difficult to describe, and even well-written scripts cannot restrict Hou Hsiao-Hsien's intuition, let alone other theories or perspectives. Consequently, as Hou's cinematographer, Mark Lee must concentrate on observing the current situation and make real-time adjustments to the camera and lighting to ensure the perfect presentation of the scene.

For instance, in the opening assassination scene of the movie, the general is playing with his son, and there is no specific game designed for the scene, only dialogue. However, a butterfly flew into the scene during the shooting, and the actors naturally interacted with it. At this moment, Mark Lee immediately signaled the camera crew to start rolling the camera and secretly captured the actors' natural and authentic interaction.

This scene's performance matches the storyline's need for the assassin to feel compassion for the general after seeing the love between him and his son.

If a fake butterfly were used, the kid actor might be unable to express their emotions truly while interacting with it. In addition, the butterfly's appearance would also surpass the original way of metaphorically expressing the father-son relationship.



The screenshot sequence of the opening assassination scene.

In addition, lighting design also played a critical role in indoor scenes. Because the thin silk

curtains in the scene are prone to overexposure and lose detail, the cinematographer must carefully control the intensity of the lighting. To create the atmosphere of indoor lighting, Mark Lee chose small HMI lamps wrapped with CTO gels and medium-sized HMI lamps reflected onto a reflector as the indoor ambient light source. As for daylight scenes, 12 heads of tungsten filament lamp sets were used to simulate the sunlight shining outside.



The screenshots of interior scene, Day and Night scenes.



The screenshots of scenery shots.

3. Mark Lee's cinematography aesthetics on the Taiwanese New Wave cinema

3.1 The introduction of Taiwanese New wave cinema

The Taiwanese New Wave Cinema movement emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, led by a group of young filmmakers and directors who sought to break away from the traditional storytelling techniques employed in the state-sponsored film industry. Instead, they aimed to produce more personal, bold, and unconventional films closer to the actual society and reviewed people's real life with a realistic cinema style. This movement brought about a revolutionary change in the Taiwanese film industry, contributing to the new look of Taiwanese cinema today.

During the 1980s, the Taiwanese film industry faced severe challenges from the domination of Hong Kong films in the Taiwanese market. Moreover, Taiwan was still under martial law, and the censorship of films by the Kuomintang (KMT) government made it difficult for young filmmakers to tell anything too controversial on screen. However, this generation of filmmakers grew up with a passion for filmmaking as an act of resistance against the regime. In addition, they were influenced by foreign cinematic movements, such as the "French New Wave" and "Italian Neorealism," and had seen the success of Hong Kong filmmaking.

In 1982, an initiative project by the Central Motion Picture Corporation (CMPC), the government-run film studio, supported fresh young directors to compete with Hong Kong films. As a result, it produced a film, "In Our Time¹," featuring four new talented directors – Edward

¹ Directed by Edward Yang, Yi Chang, Ko I-Chen and Tao Te-Chen, DOP Chen Chia-mao, 1982 Taiwan.

Yang², Te-Chen Tao, I-Chen Ko, and Yi Chang. This film was considered the beginning of the Taiwanese New Wave cinema, in contrast to the political propaganda and melodrama films of the earlier few decades.

The Taiwanese New Wave films focused more on real life with empathetic viewpoints to portray the characters, trying to depict the story between Taiwan's urban and rural areas at that time. The young directors focused on the real-life character's stories and reactions to drive the story, rather than the traditional drama narrative structure, emphasizing the story's climax. As a result, the themes of the New Wave films examined the poverty struggle under urbanization in society and the conflict of the oppressed political atmosphere at that time.

One of the iconic movies made during the Taiwanese New Wave era is Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film "A City of Sadness³," which won the Golden Lion Award for best film at the Venice International Film Festival in 1989. The story portrays the conflict between the local Taiwanese people and the new arrival regime Kuomintang (KMT) government, which just took over Taiwan after the end of the Japanese occupation. The film also reflects on the complex issue of Taiwanese identity in a historical context, even though it was taboo to discuss before the release of this film.

The other new wave iconic director Edward Yang's films "Taipei Story⁴" and "A Confucian Confusion⁵" also described the conflict between traditional values and modern materialism among young urbanites in the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately, the film "A Brighter Summer Day⁶," released in 1991, is regarded as a masterpiece of new-wave cinema. The movies of this period

² Edward Yang (1947-2007) was one of the leading directors of the Taiwanese New Wave and Taiwanese cinema. He won the Best Director Award for his 2000 film "Yi Yi" at Cannes.

³ Directed by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, DOP Chen Hwai-En, 1989 Taiwan.

⁴ Directed by Edward Yang, DOP Yang Wei-Han, 1985 Taiwan.

⁵ Directed by Edward Yang, DOP Li Long-Yu, 1994 Taiwan.

⁶ Directed by Edward Yang, DOP Chang Hui-Kung & Li Long-Yu, 1991 Taiwan.

reflect the time's social, economic, and political issues and the characters' dilemmas and struggles in the historical context. In summary, the Taiwanese New Wave Cinema movement made a significant contribution to the Taiwanese film industry and produced films that reflect the real-life issues of society.

3.2 Mark Lee Ping-Bing's cinematography aesthetics

Cinematography is a crucial tool in serving the story of a film, and its style varies depending on the director and genre. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis is necessary to understand a cinematographer's unique style. We can gain some insight into his distinct approach by examining Mark Lee Ping-Bing's past works and interviews. Mark Lee's cinematography exhibits an extensive range of styles. For example, in "A Time to Live, A Time to Die," the camera remains static, while in "The Vertical Ray of the Sun"⁷, it moves gently, akin to a lover's caress. Additionally, the number of shots in his films varies significantly, from 33 shots in "The Flowers of Shanghai" to around 4,000 shots in "Fong Sai Yuk II"⁸. Despite these differences, Mark Lee asserts that good cinematographers should sparingly pursue their preferences and styles and diversify their approach. Interestingly, Mark Lee has established his unique cinematography style over decades, characterized by a depth and height of attitude to cinematography that is unmistakably his own.

As a cinematographer who has collaborated with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien for decades, Mark Lee's "style" of cinematography is particularly apparent. Director Hou's distinctive film style and narrative perspective perfectly highlight Mark Lee's approach. The two began working together when Mark Lee had just transitioned from a camera assistant to a cinematographer. Free of constraints and with the courage to experiment with new forms, they established the image

⁷ Directed by Trần Anh Hùng, DOP Mark Lee Ping-Bing, 2001 France & Vietnam.

⁸ Directed by Corey Yuen, DOP Mark Lee Ping-Bing, 1993 Hong Kong.

aesthetics of the Taiwanese New Wave cinema, characterized by **“the pursuit of realism,”** **“long-take shots,”** and **“a preference for natural lighting.”**

3.2.1 The pursuit of realism

In the 1950s, Taiwanese cinema was dedicated to anti-communist political propaganda, thus focusing primarily on the ideological content of the films, and lacking a conscious pursuit of aesthetic style. It was not until the 1960s, especially during the "healthy realism films" period, that there was a deliberate effort to construct an aesthetic style for films. Still, it was inherited from the aesthetic style of Mainland China cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, lacking an aesthetic creation localized to Taiwan. In the 1970s, the main types of Taiwanese films were Kung Fu films and romantic films in style. Although they had a nationalist image style, they moved away from the realistic style to pursue aesthetic beauty, romanticism, sentimentality, and exaggeration. It was not until the Taiwanese New Wave Cinema Movement in the early 1980s, with the awakening of subject consciousness, that a group of film creators in Taiwan began to construct an aesthetic style that belonged to and represented contemporary Taiwanese cinema with subjectivity, independence, and uniqueness. This aesthetic style exhibits realism.

From a global perspective, beginning in the 1930s, modern Western philosophical trends such as existentialism began to flourish in various European countries. In the mid-20th century, individualism and the movement for personal liberation gained momentum in many countries and regions. In March 1960, Taiwan's "Modern Literature" magazine was launched, introducing philosophical trends such as existentialism prevalent in European and American literature. Soon, these trends sparked discussions and contemplation in Taiwan's film industry about human liberation and film liberation. The awakening of individual consciousness, self-awareness, and human subjectivity led Taiwanese New Wave Cinema to emphasize individual and self-worth and to pursue "self-expression" and "self-presentation." Even in the language

of film, a consciously pursued personalized aesthetic style emerged. The Post-World War II neorealist films and New Wave cinema have profoundly influenced the aesthetics of film viewing, paving the way for the rise of Italian neorealist cinema and French New Wave cinema. Since 1951, representative works of Italian neorealist cinema, such as "Bicycle Thieves"⁹, "Shoeshine"¹⁰, and "Rome, Open City"¹¹, have been successively released in Taiwan. Furthermore, from the 1960s, various magazines began introducing European films, including "Cahiers du Cinéma" from France and French New Wave cinema. These laid the ideological foundation for the rise of Taiwanese New Cinema in the 1980s while also nurturing corresponding talent.

André Bazin, the spiritual father of the French New Wave cinema, believed that only "the objective and detached camera can restore the world in its original purity." He argued that the moments of life are all equally important and interconnected and that cinema should break away from tightly structured narrative and drama and instead use deep focus and long takes to replace montage, which has an artificial, subjective quality. Bazin highly praised the "shot sequence—deep depth of field" (i.e., "long take"), believing that the essence of cinema is to "record life as it is" and faithfully represent reality through film. Thus, he repeatedly emphasized the unique capacity of the cinematic camera to capture and reveal reality and advocated for using the camera to record everything within a specific time frame and a particular visual field without bias while minimizing the use of montage. In some cases, montage is seen as a typical anti-cinematic literary technique.

In contrast, strictly speaking, the purest essence of cinema lies in the unity of space maintained by cinematography. Realism, in some contexts, means preserving the homogeneity of space.

⁹ Directed by Vittorio De Sica, DOP Carlo Montuori, 1948 Italy.

¹⁰ Directed by Vittorio De Sica, DOP Anchise Brizzi, 1946 Italy.

¹¹ Directed by Roberto Rossellini, DOP Ubaldo Arata, 1945 Italy.

Therefore, long takes and deep depth of field shots can strictly preserve the unity of space and the homogeneity of reality. As a result, Bazin argued that deep depth of field should be used to shoot long takes, maintaining the continuity, completeness, and homogeneity of time and space, as well as the clarity of the foreground and background, and opposing the use of short shot to cut up the real world into fragments.

Under the influence of the above background described, the New Wave cinema movement in Taiwan also exhibits the following artistic features:

1. The image extensively uses long shots, deep focus shots, and static shots.
2. The scenes have a heavy reliance on natural and outdoor settings.
3. Preference for natural lighting.
4. Regarding shot composition, a preference for medium shots, long shots, and extreme long shots rather than close-ups creates a certain distance between the camera and the subject.
5. The predominant use of eye level angle.
6. The use of non-professional actors and an emphasis on naturalistic and unexaggerated acting styles. Even when professional actors are employed, they must abandon theatrical acting techniques in favor of natural, simple, and unpretentious styles. The aim is to depict life as it is and faithfully reproduce reality in its original state.
7. The effective use of various sound and image techniques breaks the screen's confines and creates a sense of off-screen space. The presence of the screen is a product of the cinematic form and is, therefore, both an enhancement and a denial of the realism and documentary aspects of the film.
8. The extensive synchronous sound recording enhances the spatial and realistic sound quality.
9. The use of dialects and regional languages in dialogue reinforces authenticity in the narrative.

3.2.2 Long Take Shot

As a result of the French New Wave's influence on cinema, long takes gradually emerged as a prominent feature in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films. Initially, this form of expression was seen as a simple rebellion against traditional film language but gradually evolved into a unique style. Director Hou Hsiao-Hsien has stated that he utilized long takes due to the lack of professionalism in Taiwan's film industry during that time. As a consequence, he had to keep the camera in a fixed position and continuously shoot. If there were greater professional support available within Taiwan's film industry today, and yet the director still chose to employ the long-take shooting method, this aesthetic choice would be regarded as a deliberate performance.

In film production, cinematographers are constantly asked to move the camera further and broader to create a natural space for actors to perform. The camera captures the actors' natural states from a distance, forming the long-take aesthetic. This aesthetic is not only a narrative style but a way of looking at the world. Compared to montage, which originated in the Soviet Union, long takes do not cut or reassemble the shots through editing but maintain the unity of time and space. They present a rich depth of field in the picture and offer the audience multiple perspectives. Each viewing may reveal new details, much like a mirror that reveals more as one's life experiences grow. Therefore, long-take aesthetic films, despite their slow pace, are more artistically rich and have a lingering effect.

The long take aesthetic also challenges the cinematographer's aesthetic abilities, as the vastness of the space in the picture and the long duration of the shot require the audience to stare at the screen for an extended period. All details, such as light, composition, and color, are carefully examined in the image's foreground, middle ground, and background so the

audience can freely observe. In addition to being "good looking," this long uncut shot must convey story information and create an atmosphere.

Mark Lee's long-take cinematography aesthetics have gradually become his signature style. In his collaboration with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, his thoughts and practices on camera movement's "motion and stillness" have been consistently pursued. Lee's long-take cinematography can be divided into two periods: the "still long take" of the 1980s and the "moving long take" of the 1990s, especially after the film "Flowers of Shanghai."

In Hou's early films, his pursuit of realistic aesthetics and a non-preconceived sense of presence, in many ways, limited the camera's movement. The performances of non-professional actors could not withstand excessive disruptions, so the camera could only act as a silent observer from a distance, which was a special requirement for the cinematographer. However, this particular long-take aesthetic made Mark Lee keenly aware of the aesthetic dispute between the director and the cinematographer, mainly regarding the "motion and stillness" in the frame.

In this kind of collaboration process, many inspiring points emerged. On the one hand, the director required Mark Lee to focus on understanding the director's intentions and feeling and adapting to the shooting environment. In many interviews, Mark Lee talked about how he had to spend much energy dealing with director Hou during their first collaboration on "A Time to Live and a Time to Die," almost exhausting all of his sense of experience. However, on the other hand, the cinematographer needed to use the camera to convey feelings and emotions, supplementing the inherent deficiencies in the images brought about by stillness.

In the early 1980s, Mark Lee hesitated about whether the camera should move when working with director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Yet, he agreed after the director insisted on taking a long take

shot. However, in their third collaboration, "Goodbye South, Goodbye," they began to try to move the camera slightly. Although these moving shots were cut out ultimately in the editing process, he tried to use them to convey emotions and imagery in his future work.

Mark Lee mentioned 3 factors that determine camera movement :

1. the drama itself.

2. the mise-en-scène of the real-life setting and space.

3. the feeling on the set.

The first two factors are relatively easy to understand, but the third one is more subjective. The feeling on the set refers to the atmosphere and emotions captured in the scene during the shooting, which is challenging to prepare for in advance fully. During the filming of "Flowers of Shanghai," director Hou Hsiao-Hsien usually did not rehearse with the actors but instead focused on whether the camera movement captured the feeling of the scene to convey the taste of the moment.

Mark Lee's use of moving shots also led Hou Hsiao-Hsien to accept the moving long-take shot, and the camera movement made his film space broader. The moving long-take shot can also better present the observer's view of the world, and it is a significant feature in Mark Lee's cinematography. For example, in "In the Mood for Love," the moving camera emphasizes the characters' solitude and creates a sense of longing in the space, an essential aspect of the film's aesthetics.

Nowadays, many of Mark Lee's shots are still quite long, such as in the movie "The Vertical Ray of the Sun," where out of 305 total shots, there are 59 shots lasting more than 30 seconds. Moreover, among those 59 long-take shots, there are as many as 52 camera-moving shots.

The slow movement of the long-take shots is like a storyteller narrating a tale aside. The mise-en-scène in the frame is like a breathing rhythm, relying on the panning movement of the

camera as if using the camera movement as a montage. Accomplishing such a long shot in one take is challenging because the continuous movement is natural and effortless, like human breathing. Therefore, this should be considered a high level of camera movement.

Mark Lee's contemplation of the relationship between movement and stillness is a process from sensibility to rationality and back to sensibility. Nowadays, motion and stillness are no longer a complete contradiction but a fused whole. Unable to be independent in stillness, not purely in motion, what Mark Lee pursues is still a "fusion" under traditional Eastern aesthetics, which is particularly dialectical but not self-centered. Because for movie creation, the cinematographer's tolerance and adaptation to the film's story always come first, and the debate between movement and stillness is often a kind of resolution and harmony.

3.2.3 The preference for natural lighting

"If you do not observe light and shadow, you will never master it. If you do not care about it, it will not be yours. That is just the way it is."

Mark Lee emphasizes that a cinematographer must first understand the characteristics of light to become excellent. He points out that the impression of lighting usually comes from observation and memory in daily life. In the film, the most infectious aspect is the authentic light and shadow effects, and simple beauty is not enough to move the audience's hearts. Therefore, realism is the foundation of film creation. A context that fits the situation must be set to allow actors to perform freely.

Observing natural light and making good use of it is a significant challenge for cinematographers when shooting a film. Although the use of natural light has its drawbacks, such as the difficulty in maintaining consistency of natural light in the frame, as long as the cinematographer is keenly observant and patient, the authenticity of natural light will inherently appear in the image. Mark Lee observes that the daily light enters different spaces from

different angles, and each space has its unique atmosphere. However, when most of the crew enter the shooting location, and the light gears are turned on, the original natural atmosphere disappears altogether, replaced by artificial light. With the advancement of modern technology, people's craftsmanship and concepts have significantly changed compared to before. The new technology lacks the unique human feeling that has gradually disappeared.

He attempted to integrate natural light and shadow with characters in his films, aiming to recreate the colors and shadows he had known and remembered from his childhood memory. In the movie, he naturally displayed natural light and used many household lights as on-set lighting. He often saw faint or dim lights and tried to capture them on film. However, he stated that these lights and shadows are often irreproducible, as many high-wattage light gears cause these colors to disappear when turned on.

However, these natural lights and shadows directly touched the audience's hearts. For example, tears twinkled in mother's eyes when she wrote a letter with a small desk lamp. In the faint light, Grandma waved a fan to accompany her grandson to sleep through a mosquito net. The morning light shone through the hot steam rising from the pot when the lid was lifted from the stove, creating a life-like atmosphere that made the "realness" of Taiwanese New Wave cinema particularly moving.

Mark Lee called this "colored black and white" style of filming because his shots are always dark and seem reluctant to speak but full of emotions. For example, in the movie "Dust in the Wind," when the train passes through a tunnel, the screen flickers, the camera remains still, and only the dust-like lights and shadows sway and move along with the train, portraying the bittersweetness of the young couple during their youthful period. But with each successive tunnel, the images become more precise and penetrating.

From a practical perspective, this natural light filming style is greatly influenced by environmental limitations. For example, if many lighting gears are used on the set, multiple lighting assistants must be employed, and more time and budget must be invested. However, if there are limitations on the use of lighting equipment, a unique style can be formed instead.

Films often find a unique style within limitations because of the dual limitations of the environment and creative ideas, resulting in a realistic style. For example, Mark Lee advocates using natural light in his filming and strictly limits artificial lighting. Therefore, he can respect the natural and authentic appearance of the environment without deliberately changing it. Instead, he blends natural light and shadow into the images to present a more authentic picture.

Mark Lee Ping-Bing's filming style is more delicate than the standardized process of Hollywood industrial filming. For example, in Hollywood filming, if sunlight is needed, large lighting equipment will simulate sunlight; if crowds are needed, many extras will be hired to come to the scene. However, the market for the Asian film industry is smaller, and this practice's budget is not feasible. Therefore, Mark Lee can find a unique style within limitations, and it's his expression of humility and awe of nature.

He can blend natural light and shadow into his images with a humble and reverent attitude and find a unique style within limitations.

4. The International Production Collaboration

When the films that Mark Lee Ping-Bing was involved in caused a tremendous response at international film festivals, his unique perspective quickly gained more attention from others which led to international film production companies actively contacting Mark Lee Ping-Bing and collaborating to provide him with more opportunities to showcase his abilities. Working with directors worldwide, Mark Lee Ping-Bing could experiment with different filming styles from mainland China, the United States, and Europe. Each collaboration brought him new resources and energy. At the same time, Lee Ping-Bing also brought his aesthetic sense of cinematography to these films from different cultures.

This chapter would like to see his approach to multi-culture production works and any unique aesthetic philosophy from his background shown in these films.

4.1 Film “Air Doll,” by Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda

Mark Lee’s Realism style and dolly shot of camera movement.

The film "Air Doll," in which Lee Ping-Bing collaborated with director Hirokazu Kore-eda, was a fantasy genre that Mark Lee Ping-Bing had never attempted. The story depicts an air doll that comes to life and enters the human world with a completely innocent heart, experiencing a love story in its brief life. The film's main character is a human actor who plays the role of the air doll, but the director does not want to make a movie that is "not realistic."

In order to capture the feeling of a human-shaped plastic doll for the actress playing the air doll, special lighting, cinematography, and makeup had to be designed. However, the director

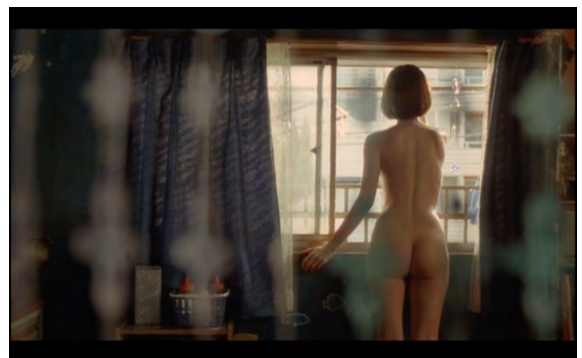
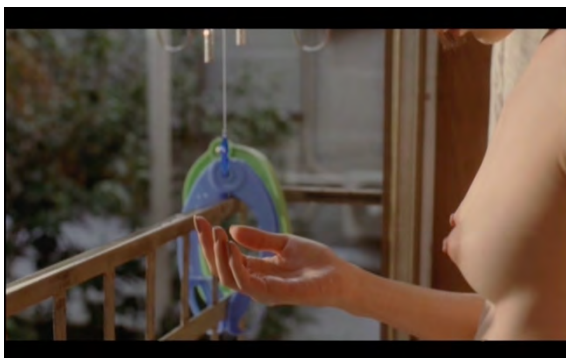
insisted on "not using special effects in post-production." Instead, he wanted everything to be achieved during on-location shooting, whether the air doll floating in the air or the shots of her transforming from a mannequin into a living being. This filming idea was consistent with Mark Lee Ping-Bing's past focus on "realism" in his cinematography. Therefore, the primary goal of visual design was to achieve realism without using special effects.

Mark Lee aimed to use a dynamic approach to capture this film's characters, landscapes, and emotions. He employed colored filters and Angenieux and Zeiss lenses to give the Tokyo cityscape a clear and delicate coloration, presenting a visual experience different from that of director Hirokazu Kore-eda's previous works.

Director Hirokazu Kore-eda has consistently used fixed static shots in his previous works. He believes that in daily life, when we listen to someone talking or gaze at someone, we do not move. Therefore, he tends to use fixed static shots with the camera placed where the characters look at each other. However, when he first collaborated with cinematographer Lee Ping-Bing, he tried using dolly shots to move the camera, but there was no discomfort. He found this approach easier to capture the actors' emotional performances.

Director Hirokazu Kore-eda believes that Mark Lee's dolly shot style is not to showcase the dazzling technique of moving the camera but to decide on the angle to capture the actors' performances only after observing how they move in space and how their emotional expressions change during the actual shooting. Therefore, Mark Lee's thinking process always starts with the actor's performance and then considers how to shoot while also matching the actors' movements and emotional climax to capture emotionally intense scenes. Therefore, he believes that "the existence of the actors comes before the design of the shots." Unlike other cinematographers who tend to make actors follow the camera's movements, Lee does not limit or demand that actors do so. Instead, he adjusts the camera to match the actors' performances.

In contrast to the director's usual static framing style, Mark Lee utilized his signature dolly shots with swaying camera movements in almost every scene, even using a dolly in narrow spaces. During filming, the director and crew would guess where Mark Lee would set up his tracks. This filming style required the cinematographer to constantly observe the actors and environment to adjust the camera movements, creating smooth shots that allow the audience to immerse themselves in the film's world and blend the characters' emotions with their surroundings.



The screenshot sequence of the opening scene introduces the Air Doll.

When filming a fantasy genre without relying on post-production special effects, the opening scene introducing the Air Doll was shot using manually operated semi-transparent human figures. Mark Lee chose to utilize light passing through the plastic doll and projecting its shadow on the wall to depict the non-human characteristics of the character, successfully

achieving the desired effect without special effects.



The screenshot sequence of the Air Doll was punctured.

The fascinating scene is when the Air Doll is punctured while working, gradually losing air and deflating, and her beloved man kneels down to blow the air back into her. This scene was shot

using practical effects; the actress was hidden underneath the floor, with only her head exposed, while the man blew air into the plastic body prop. Even though the actress's body was hidden beneath the floor, she could still see her fake plastic hands inflating and deflating in front of her. After filming this scene, the actors expressed that seeing the body inflate and deflate in front of their eyes drew them emotionally into the scene. If only relying on the actors' imagination and using computer-generated special effects on the screen, it would be difficult for the actors themselves to capture this mood. This realistic and poetic expression further highlights Mark Lee's aesthetic style.

Mark Lee's poetic visual style, which uses space, environment, and time to reflect the characters' moods, is displayed in the opening scene of "Air Doll." This first shot is full of philosophical thoughts about life. The scene begins with a middle-aged man riding the train home alone after work, and the train is running on an elevated track. Outside the window, there are car lights on the busy city road, but inside the train, where the middle-aged man is lost in thought, it is like another quiet space. This shot presents a world of two rhythms and atmospheres, echoing the "Air Doll" theme.



The screenshot sequence of the "Air Doll" opening shot.

Mark Lee keenly observed the scenery outside the window while shooting this scene and immediately asked the director to film it. The light and shadow outside the window and the scenery inside the train car blend seamlessly, creating an incredibly poetic image. This shot also earned high praise from director Hirokazu Kore-eda, who said, "Mark Lee has a very animalistic sixth sense for the observation of space and time."

4.2 Film “Renoir,” by French director Gilles Bourdos

Mark Lee's Color Aesthetics.

The film recounts the fascinating tale of Andrée Heuschling, also recognized as Catherine Hessling. She was the last muse of the renowned impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir and served as the first leading actress in the movies directed by his son, Jean Renoir. Andrée was the pivotal connection between two esteemed artists, a father who had reached the twilight of his illustrious career and a son who was still finding his way in cinema, his remarkable trajectory as a celebrated movie director yet to begin.

Renoir is a master of Impressionist paintings. He is renowned for his delicate portrayal of the female body's skin, which is different from the golden oil painting texture created by Mark Lee Ping-Bing in the movie "Flowers of Shanghai." In Renoir's paintings, colors are more abundant and lighter. He painted over 6,000 paintings in his lifetime, using brushes and colors to create a world biased toward golden hues. Instead, he used purple and blue to depict the shadows on the skin, which are the colors that sunlight shining through leaves creates on the skin. To capture Renoir's painting style, Mark Lee Ping-Bing did not choose a diffusion and soft-focus filter but adjusted the lighting for filming the actors' skin.

When filming indoor scenes, the painting studio set was newly built and lacked the texture and traces of previous use. To create a heavy and used texture, Mark Lee used warm-toned tungsten lights placed on the roof and bounced the light to create some ambient light in the environment.

Usually, there is little need for additional lighting when shooting outdoor scenes. However, to capture the oil painting texture of Renoir's paintings, the lighting team set up several tungsten

lights with different colored gels, especially using golden gels to create an excellent sun-like effect in certain areas. Mark Lee hoped to capture the scenes in a way that resembled Renoir's paintings.



The screenshots of indoor painting studio scenes.

In Renoir's paintings, trees have a weighty quality under sunlight, so heavy golden gels were added to slightly alter the color of the green leaves. Although it may have looked slightly distorted on set, the final movie looked authentic and closely resembled Renoir's painting style.



The screenshots of outdoor scenes with golden gels tungsten lighting.

Regarding film stock selection, this film used Tungsten balanced film stock - Kodak Vision3 500T 5219. It is worth noting that Mark Lee did not use an 85-color-conversion filter during many indoor daylight scenes to adjust the color temperature as usual. As a result, the outdoor daylight scenes in the film had a blue color cast, with the sky and greenery appearing slightly bluish. Also, to maintain the warm-toned light sources indoors, more CTO and golden gels

were used—this blue color contrasted with the golden tones, matching Renoir's painting style.



The screenshots of day scenes shot by Kodak 500T filmstock without the 85-cc filter.

Interestingly, most of the film labs in France were already closing down then. So ultimately, the film lab used standard one-light printing light to print copies first for color grading. In this challenging grading process, the director, Mark Lee, and the film colorist had to adjust the RGB values of the printing light together in the screening room.

Eventually, the copy produced was lovely, with vibrant colors that strongly evoked the era. This process also proved that Mark Lee had successfully captured the light, shadow, and color he pursued during filming, reducing the need for subsequent color correction in the post-production. According to Mark Lee, as an old-school cinematographer, he prefers to create his images on set rather than rely on post-production. This film also became Mark Lee's last work to use traditional film color grading methods.

5. Conclusion

In the years before and after the lifting of martial law, a group of emerging filmmakers led the Taiwanese film industry in redefining the meaning of "story" in the context of renewed freedom of speech. This new wave movement also allowed more genuine and profound stories to be seen internationally.

Cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bing and director Hou Hsiao-Hsien completed many works together over 30 years, which in part defined the aesthetics of Taiwan's New Wave cinema. Their use of poetic long takes, fixed long shots, and natural lighting was also one of their signature styles. Mark Lee Ping-Bing began questioning why film scenes were always lit as if they were high noon, regardless of the scene's mood, from the moment he started as a camera assistant. The response then was, "that is just how it has always been."



Screenshot of 1970s Taiwanese romantic melodrama movie "Cloud of Romance."

In the early days of Taiwanese cinema, cinematographers typically sought bright and full lighting effects. From the screenshot above, we can see to capture a close-up shot of an actor, they would use multiple lighting gears, including the key lights, fill lights, top lights, side lights, eye lights, and even an intense light directed explicitly from behind the actor to create a sense of depth in the image. In addition, they would also add ambient light to the overall environment.

These complex lighting arrangements were all done for the purpose of filming a single character.

However, movies themselves are collective hypnosis. When viewers are captivated by images in a dark cinema, even if the scene portrays night, the lighting can still be as bright as day, and viewers will still accept it. This explains why actors can sleep in movies even with heavy makeup or why audiences accept other unrealistic scenes.

Nevertheless, the viewing habits of audiences change and evolve. When viewers are no longer hypnotized and cannot immerse themselves in the story along with the images, it means that cinematic aesthetics' methods, concepts, and techniques need to be constantly updated. Therefore, Mark Lee began to question the existing lighting methods in movies and started to try changing the lighting arrangements. He drew inspiration from his own life experiences and attempted to portray realistic images closer to the audience's memories.

Mark Lee's thoughts on using "light" can be traced back to when he was a camera assistant. Before the formal shooting of each scene, he had to confirm the brightness and atmosphere of the lighting with the gaffer. He always tried to adjust the lighting atmosphere in secret to practice his lighting ideas. Whenever the cinematographer asked him if the lighting was sufficient, Mark Lee would always answer that it was enough, even though it was far below the traditional standards of that time. As a result, every time they watched the print, the cinematographer would always criticize and question the lighting: "Mark! This image is not bright enough." However, the director believed that the image was good, indirectly encouraging and agreeing with Mark Lee's way of handling the lighting.

With the support of director Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Mark Lee Ping-Bing could finally apply his ideas and principles about light and shadow to actual shooting scenarios. Mark Lee's pursuit of a

natural, simple, yet emotionally impactful lighting effect gradually became more apparent and distinct in his cinematographic works. In his subsequent works, Mark Lee Ping-Bing demonstrated his talent and genius for shooting with natural light and even low light sources, creating many images full of contrast and detail layers that enriched the emotion and atmosphere of the films, exhibiting an unparalleled sense of space.

Many people may have felt unfamiliar with or could not understand Mark Lee Ping-Bing's shooting style at the time. His created images typically used dim light sources, making distinguishing between characters and backgrounds difficult. In completely black scenes, seeing anything beyond indoor lights was almost impossible. In addition, his image pacing was plodding, with some shots lasting over five minutes without any editing cut. During this shot, the audience could only see actors living in the frame like everyday life. However, these elements were the aesthetic inspiration Mark Lee Ping-Bing drew from traditional Chinese ink paintings. He attempted to provide rich scenery and details in every frame, immersing the audience in the image. His slow pacing and long-take shots not only revealed the passing of time but also highlighted the emotional changes in the characters in the film. As Mark Lee Ping-Bing said, "Time passes, the scenery remains, and people and things change, but it seems like there is still a little bit of hope and a little bit of light in life." With this poetic creative concept, Mark Lee Ping-Bing was known as a "poet of light and shadow."

Perhaps all visible before him is just that tiny amount of light, but for Mark Lee Ping-Bing, even a little light is enough.

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