

What Brings Us Together Here? A Study on the Golden Horse Awards for Best Documentary Feature (2013-2023)
Vince Wen

Yangyang Xu & Vince Wen

CINE-GT 3105

Dec 18, 2024

Final Paper

What Brings Us Together Here?

- A Study on the GHA for Best Documentary Feature(2013-2023)

Introduction

As one of the most prominent platforms in the Sinophone film industry, the Golden Horse Awards (GHA) often see their Best Documentary category overlooked. By examining the selection and awarding history of the GHA Best Documentary over the past decade (2013-2023), we observe a significant aesthetic shift—from ecological documentaries to political documentaries. These changes have, whether intentionally or unintentionally, intertwined with and triggered cultural and political events across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. This raises some critical questions: What are the selection criteria and evaluation mechanisms for documentaries at the Golden Horse Awards? And how has the Best Documentary award evolved over the past ten years? Moreover, what do these changes reveal about the shifting political relationships among Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China? As a cinematic medium, how does the Golden Horse Awards reflect the political transformations within Sinophone societies? Furthermore, to what extent is it influenced by political forces? To explore these questions, this research draws on an interview with Wen Tien-Hsiang(), alongside an analysis of interviews, critiques, and archival materials. It aims to trace the aesthetic transformations of the Best Documentary award over the past decade and the resulting political and social ramifications.

The Golden Horse Awards and Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival

The Golden Horse Awards , held annually in Taiwan, is the longest-standing Sinophone film award and one of the most influential and prestigious accolades in the Asian film industry. It is often dubbed the "Oscars of the Sinophone world." The name "Golden Horse" dates back to the Cold War era, reflecting the enduring hostility between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). It is not derived from "gold" or "horses" but is a

portmanteau of "Kinmen()" and "Matsu()," two islands that served as KMT military outposts during the Cold War. In Taiwan, since the introduction of Mandarin (Guoyu) as the official language in 1959 and the subsequent promotion of Mandarin-language films (Guopian), the Golden Horse Awards were established as a cultural-political project by the KMT to promote, showcase, and reward Mandarin cinema. However, its classification as a film festival has been contentious. Some scholars argue that true film festivals center on film screenings rather than serving primarily as industry awards. By this definition, the GHA may not qualify as a film festival. Nonetheless, with the establishment of the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in 1980 and its merger with the GHA in 1990, the Golden Horse Awards and the film festival became an integrated, large-scale international film event.

As a cinematic medium, the Golden Horse Awards have historically been deeply embedded in the cultural policies of the KMT. During the early Cold War period, the GHA also reflected Taiwan's position as part of the "Free Asia" alliance, promoting anti-communist ideology through cultural channels. The Central Motion Picture Corporation (, CMPC), responsible for producing most of Taiwan's feature films and documentaries in the early GHA years, was itself a key player in the Cold War-era Asian film network. This made the GHA and the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival inextricably tied to Sinophone political contexts before the 21st century. However, the GHA has also faced ongoing debates about its commercial versus artistic focus. Compared to Mainland China's Golden Rooster Awards and Hong Kong's Hong Kong Film Awards, the GHA is known for its rigorous selection standards and emphasis on artistic expression, standing in stark contrast to the commercial leanings of other Sinophone film festivals. Yet, as a central node in the Asian film festival network, the GHA has been influenced by the diverse capital and policies of the broader Asia-Pacific region. This has continually cast doubt on its independence and artistic integrity."Film festivals make cultural capital concrete in the shapes of Golden Palms, Bears, Lions, Leopards, and other gilded figurines that populate carousels of screening and appraisal." Similarly, the Golden Horse Awards trophy-shaped as a horse-functions as an emblem of cultural capital in the commercial and independent film industries across Asia.

Historical Development of the Best Documentary Category

Over the past six decades, The Golden Horse Awards for the Best Documentary Feature category has emerged as a critical space for artistic and thematic innovation. Its evolution reflects not only the creative development of Taiwanese cinema but also Taiwan's broader cultural transformation, democratization, and engagement with political realities across the Sinophone world. From its inception as a vehicle for state-driven propaganda to its current role as a platform for independent, experimental, and politically sensitive voices, the category offers a lens through which to examine key shifts in both cinema and society.

In its early years (1962-1988), the Best Documentary category largely reflected the priorities of Taiwan's martial law period under KMT regime. Documentaries served as tools for state propaganda and cultural promotion, portraying themes of national pride, economic growth, and anti-communist ideology. Newsreels, often funded and distributed by government-affiliated organizations like the CMPC, dominated this period. These films highlighted Taiwan's modernization projects, infrastructure development, and military

preparedness, aligning with the KMT's ideological messaging. Creative freedom was significantly restricted, as filmmakers were required to adhere to state-approved narratives. Wen, in reflecting on this era, described documentaries as " " (tools with a singular perspective), emphasizing their limited scope and lack of personal expression.

The lifting of martial law in 1987 marked a pivotal moment in Taiwan's cultural and cinematic landscape. The democratization of Taiwanese society provided filmmakers with unprecedented creative freedom, allowing them to explore themes previously considered politically or socially sensitive. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Best Documentary category began to reflect a shift toward more socially conscious and character-driven narratives. Documentaries explored topics such as environmental degradation, indigenous rights, cultural identity, and Taiwan's evolving political landscape. With the rise of digital filmmaking, production costs decreased, enabling independent filmmakers to experiment with storytelling techniques and tackle more nuanced subjects.

Artistic Merit and Selection Mechanisms of the GHA

The Golden Horse Awards stand as a rare example of artistic independence in a region marked by cultural and political complexities. Nowhere is this commitment to impartiality and creative excellence more evident than in the Best Documentary Feature category. Over the decades, the GHA has developed a rigorous and transparent selection process that prioritizes artistic merit, thematic innovation, and technical craftsmanship over commercial success or external influence. This process safeguards the festival's reputation for fairness and inclusivity, while reinforcing its role as a platform for independent voices.

As explained by Wen, the selection process for the Best Documentary Feature involves three meticulously organized stages. Wen emphasized that these stages reflect both the festival's professional rigor and its underlying ethos of inclusivity. The transparency of this process has become a hallmark of the GHA's success.

Initial Screening: Every year, the Golden Horse Film Festival receives approximately 500 digital cinema package (DCP) submissions across all categories. Of these, the Best Documentary Feature unit accounts for about 100 entries. In the first round, a committee of professional reviewers—including documentary filmmakers, film scholars, editors, and critics—screens each submission. Works are evaluated based on their artistic quality, technical execution, and thematic depth. According to Wen, this stage acts as the "first filter" to identify works that best represent the spirit of independent documentary filmmaking: " " (The first stage is professional filtering, with a focus on creative sincerity, visual expression, and narrative completeness.) (Wen, personal interview).

Semi-Final Round: From the pool of initial entries, a shortlist of 15-20 works is created. In this stage, an 11-member jury panel is assembled to engage in in-depth evaluation and discussion. The panel includes professionals across various fields of cinema—directors, cinematographers, editors, and film critics—ensuring a diversity of perspectives. Wen

underscored the significance of the multi-disciplinary jury in assessing the unique merits of documentary works:" " (The value of documentaries lies not only in their technical execution but in their fusion of emotion, perspective, and authenticity.) (Wen, personal interview).

During this round, jurors engage in collective deliberation to consider each film's storytelling approach, emotional impact, and societal relevance. The freedom to present controversial or politically charged works reflects the GHA's steadfast commitment to artistic autonomy and cultural diversity.

Final Deliberation:The final stage is where the ultimate winner of the Best Documentary Feature is determined. A rotating panel of 17 jurors, including six newly appointed members, evaluates the shortlisted films through collective dialogue and debate. This rotating mechanism is significant in preventing voting stagnation or favoritism. Wen highlighted this as a core principle of the GHA's structural integrity:" " (The Golden Horse jury mechanism emphasizes diversity and fresh perspectives, ensuring fairness and transparency in the selection process.) (Wen, personal interview).

The presence of legal oversight during final deliberations further underscores the GHA's dedication to ethical evaluation. Jury members must articulate their judgments clearly and defend their selections, creating an atmosphere of accountability and professional rigor.

While the Golden Horse Awards are renowned for their independence, they have not been immune to external pressures, particularly from commercial and political forces. However, Wen repeatedly emphasized that the GHA's role is to protect creative freedom and provide filmmakers with a platform to share their truths. Wen noted that documentary filmmakers often work outside mainstream production systems, taking on significant financial and personal risks to tell stories that challenge societal norms: " " (The responsibility of the Golden Horse Awards is to provide these creators with a stage where authentic voices can be heard.) (Wen, personal interview).

This commitment to artistic freedom is particularly significant in a region where other film festivals may prioritize state narratives or commercial viability. For example, the Golden Rooster Awards in Mainland China and other state-sponsored festivals are often constrained by political censorship. In contrast, the GHA remains a rare space for works that explore sensitive topics-whether environmental crises, marginalized communities, or social resistance.

Wen also acknowledged that the GHA does not seek to politicize cinema, but rather to "let the films speak for themselves." The festival's impartiality and focus on merit-based evaluation ensure that even politically charged works are judged primarily on their artistic merit and storytelling power.

The GHA's selection process highlights the dual nature of documentary filmmaking as both an art form and a tool for social commentary. Documentaries recognized in the Best Documentary Feature category often push the boundaries of visual storytelling, combining cinematic innovation with urgent narratives. This ability to merge form and content allows documentaries to provoke reflection, challenge dominant discourses, and document historical realities.

As Wen remarked: " " (A good documentary allows audiences to see not just images but reality itself; that is the power of documentaries.) (Wen, personal interview). Through its meticulous selection process, the Golden Horse Awards have elevated the documentary form, affirming its cultural and artistic value while fostering cross-regional dialogue within the Sinophone world.

The Political and Aesthetic Shifts in the GHA Best Documentary (2013-2023)

1. From Ma Ying-jeou(, KMT) to Tsai Ing-wen(, DDP)

From the beginning of Ma's administration in 2008 until 2013, the documentaries that won or were nominated for the GHA primarily focused on the struggles of marginalized communities in China. However, after 2013, themes criticizing Chinese politics became increasingly evident. By 2016, following the transfer of power to Tsai and the DPP, films and discourse opposing Chinese hegemony began to emerge. This evolution suggests that the 2013 Best Documentary winner, *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* (2013), can be seen as a turning point in Taiwan's political transition. The 2014 *Sunflower Movement*(), which opposed the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement(), marked the rise of the DPP's influence and drove Taiwan-China relations to a new low following the third power transition. Correspondingly, the three GHA Best Documentary winners from 2014 to 2016 all contained elements that confronted the historical and social forces of Chinese hegemony to varying degrees.

First, the 2014 award-winning documentary *Cotton* (2014) delivered a politically critical message by mocking China's modernization efforts with the statement, "Modernization has been achieved, but communism certainly hasn't," as female factory workers recounted their experiences of labor exploitation. Second, the 2015 award-winning documentary *The Chinese Mayor* (2015) depicted the political events surrounding Geng Yanbo(), the former mayor of Datong(), Shanxi(), who initiated large-scale demolition and reconstruction of ancient city walls in 2007. The film was subsequently banned by the Chinese government. Besides, the 2015 nominated documentary *On the Rim of the Sky* (2015) portrayed the struggles over funding in rural Chinese primary schools. Additionally, another 2015 nominee, *Wansei Back Home* (2015), focused on eight Japanese individuals born in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period, who returned from Japan to Taiwan to reconnect with friends from that era, highlighting the close friendship and ties between Taiwan and Japan. And the 2016 Best Documentary award winner, *Le Moulin* (2016), explored the 1930s Taiwanese literary group "The Windmill Poetry Society," tracing the development of the surrealist movement in Taiwan. It also reflected the cultural imagination of connecting Taiwan with the world, as envisioned by the poets of the Windmill Poetry Society during the Japanese colonial period, emphasizing

the deep historical ties between Taiwan and Japan. Whether through anti-communist or pro-Japanese themes, the changes in the GHA Best Documentary award during these three years suggest the waning influence of Kuomintang rule. This laid the groundwork for the rise of the DPP and Tsai's administration, during which politically sensitive documentaries- often banned in Mainland China-gained recognition on the Golden Horse Awards stage.

Is it political policies and trends that shape this documentary award, which holds significant cultural capital and visibility in the Sinophone world, or is the award itself a mirror that truthfully reflects sociopolitical changes in Sinophone societies? Although Wen emphasized in interviews that the GHA are unrelated to political policies and that no Taiwanese political figures participate in the judging or awarding processes, it is undeniable that the Best Documentary award is deeply intertwined with the political evolution of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China.

From Ecological Documentaries to Political Documentaries

Between 2013 and 2023, the GHA Best Documentary category saw a shift in aesthetic preference from ecological documentaries to political documentaries. This trend, however, is closely intertwined with the evolving political relationship between Taiwan and Mainland China, as well as the rise of political movements across the three regions. As Wen explained: " " (We do not seek to challenge politics, but politics sometimes affects culture. Our commitment is to let the films speak and let the audience decide.) (Wen, personal interview). Because the GHA jury consists of experts and filmmakers from various segments of the Sinophone film industry, the aesthetic shift in the Best Documentary category also reflects the cultural and political influences shaping this group of jurors.

The 2013 GHA Best Documentary, *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*, directed by Taiwanese aerial photographer Chi Po-Lin(), marked a turning point. This was the first Taiwanese film to feature exclusively aerial footage and be released in theaters, exploring the environmental realities of Taiwan. The documentary is divided into two parts: the first part uses stunning aerial imagery to showcase Taiwan's natural beauty with minimal narration or dialogue, emphasizing an impact aesthetic. Through breathtaking views of mountains, seas, and indigenous chanting, it creates an eco-sublime audiovisual experience, evoking awe and emotional resonance for nature. The second part unveils the environmental destruction behind the natural beauty, highlighting issues such as landslides, polluted rivers, garbage-filled oceans, and the devastating effects of cement industries and factories. Narration guides the audience to understand the gravity of these environmental damages, transforming visual impact into reflections on environmental ethics. The overwhelming success of *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* in Taiwan's film market sparked widespread public discourse on environmental issues and inspired a new wave of Taiwanese environmental documentaries. Wen referred to the film as a cultural milestone:" ." ('Beyond Beauty' broke through niche audiences and truly touched the emotions and awareness of society.) (Wen, personal interview)

The documentary not only raised awareness of Taiwan's environmental issues but also

inadvertently exposed violations such as illegal construction at Qingjing Farm and cancer-causing waste discharge by Advanced Semiconductor Engineering (ASE), stirring political unrest within the Kuomintang and indirectly leading to the resignation of then-Minister of the Interior, Lee Hong-Yuan(). As such, the wave of Taiwanese ecological documentaries represented by *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above* spurred debates on environmental ethics and inadvertently interfered in Taiwan's political activities. " It appears that the success of this popular ecodocumentary cannot be defined in exclusively commercial terms. Its repercussion in the real world suggests that the 'impact aesthetic' of popular, blockbuster cinema deserves more attention from ecocinema critics." The recognition of *Beyond Beauty* highlighted the growing importance of documentaries as vehicles for public discourse and social change. Its success demonstrated that documentaries could achieve mainstream visibility while maintaining artistic integrity and thematic relevance.

In that case, how were the political documentaries recognized as GHA Best Documentary after 2013 selected? And how did they form an intertextuality with contemporary Taiwanese and Chinese-speaking societies? After 2013, from 2014 to 2018, GHA Best Documentary awards were given to films from Taiwan and Mainland China that, to varying degrees, engaged with the political dynamics of China, Japan, and Taiwan: *Cotton* (2014), *The Chinese Mayor* (2015), *Le Moulin* (2016), and *Inmates* (2018). Only the 2019 Best Documentary went to Tsai Ming-liang()'s *Your Face* . In the subsequent years of 2020 and 2021, the GHA for Best Documentary were directly awarded to films related to political movements. The 2020 Best Documentary winner, *Lost Course* (2019, directed by Jill Li), documented grassroots movements in Wukan() Village, Guangdong() Province, China. A nominated documentary that year, *Taking Back the Legislature* (2020), produced by anonymous Hong Kong filmmakers, chronicled the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests. The 2021 Best Documentary award was given to *Revolution of Our Times* (2021, directed by Kiwi Chow), a Hong Kong documentary centered on the movement opposing amendments to the extradition bill in Hong Kong.

Taiwanese scholar Li-Hsin Kuo() defines "political documentaries" as films that: "In my view, politically engaged documentary films has two meanings, both largely absent in mainstream Taiwanese productions:9 films that document or discuss political histories, events, issues, or current phenomena; and films that deal, however slightly, with any subject matter with some insight into the embedded political dimension." Li-Hsin Kuo once expressed concern about the depoliticization of mainstream Taiwanese documentaries after the 1990s. However, he did not foresee the immense political waves sparked by *Our Youth in Taiwan* , (2018), a documentary on Taiwanese political movements. Despite Taiwan's heavy investment in frequent elections since the 1990s, the society's deeper understanding of democracy and politics has not necessarily advanced. Electoral activities have increasingly become contests for political interests rather than broader engagement with societal and cultural development. The GHA Best Documentary category provides a platform for these politically engaged documentaries to gain exposure and supports non-mainstream filmmakers who create political documentaries. Hence, the shift from ecological to political documentaries in the GHA Best Documentary category from 2013 to 2023 is not without precedent. The commercial and artistic debates sparked by *Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above*, as well as its sociopolitical impacts from environmental to political issues, underscore the inherent political critique in ecological documentaries. Subsequently, the emergence of political documentaries on the GHA stage inadvertently reflected the evolving political dynamics among Taiwan, Mainland China, and Hong Kong.

The Political Controversies Surrounding the GHA Best Documentary (2013-2023)

1. Our Youth in Taiwan and the "Taiwan Independence" Speech

The 2018 Best Documentary winner, *Our Youth in Taiwan*, is set against the backdrop of the Sunflower Movement and other social and political movements. The film focuses on Taiwanese student leader Chen Wei-Ting() and Chinese international student Tsai Bo-Yi(), with director Fu Yue() serving as both narrator and an on-screen subject of the documentary. Director Fu Yue's acceptance speech at the 2018 Golden Horse Awards, where she expressed hope for Taiwan's international recognition. Following Fu Yue's controversial speech in 2018, where she expressed hope for Taiwan's international recognition, the Chinese film industry's boycott of the Golden Horse Awards created significant economic and political challenges. Mainland Chinese filmmakers and investors withdrew their participation, and the festival faced intense scrutiny from pro-China media. This incident underscored the precarious position of the GHA within the geopolitical tensions of the Sinophone world. Yet, rather than compromising its principles, the GHA doubled down on its role as a space for free expression. However, the festival's recognition of politically sensitive works reaffirms its role as a space for dissenting voices and independent storytelling. Wen emphasized the importance of protecting this space, stating: " " (The influence of politics cannot be ignored, but we have a responsibility to ensure that genuine works are seen and discussed.) (Wen, personal interview)

This stance underscores the GHA's position as a cultural institution committed to artistic integrity, even in the face of geopolitical pressures. The Best Documentary Feature category exemplifies the delicate balance that the Golden Horse Awards must strike between artistic freedom and external political pressures. From environmental crises to democratic movements, documentaries exploring politically sensitive topics provide audiences with perspectives that are often inaccessible in everyday life, resonating with and stirring the emotions of viewers. As Wen noted, documentaries are particularly powerful because they capture "unfiltered realities" and provide alternative perspectives that challenge dominant narratives: " " (The power of documentaries lies in their truth; they amplify voices that are otherwise ignored. This is the value the Golden Horse Awards must protect.) (Wen, personal interview).

However, this artistic freedom comes under increasing threat. Throughout the history of the GHA, there have been numerous political controversies between Taiwan and Mainland China. Tony Lan(), who has served as a jury member for the Golden Horse International Critics' Prize (FIPRESCI), observed: "Certain incidents have happened at international film festivals, for example, over the use of the name 'Taiwan', which China thought should be 'China Taiwan'. There's a sense of fear. Every filmmaker has to take sides." The Chinese government's boycott of the GHA demonstrates how political influence can weaponize cultural institutions to silence dissent. This strategy extends beyond the film industry; it reflects a broader effort to suppress alternative voices and reinforce state-approved narratives. In this context, the GHA's unwavering commitment to showcasing diverse and often subversive

works is not merely an artistic choice but a political statement. As Wen explained: " " (We do not seek to challenge politics, but politics sometimes affects culture. Our commitment is to let the films speak and let the audience decide.) (Wen, personal interview).

2.The GHA Best Documentary (2020-2021) and Hong Kong's Political Movements

As early as the 2016 Golden Horse Awards ceremony, Ying Liang(), the director of A Sunny Day-a short film about Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement that won Best Live Action Short Film-stated: "I am a Chinese filmmaker, but I can no longer return to China. The responsibility does not lie with me; I simply did what I was supposed to do. I believe Hong Kong still retains some space for free expression, and it is all the more important to defend these spaces." During that year's ceremony, the live broadcast in China experienced two abrupt "screen blackouts." By 2020 and 2021, the Best Documentary awards and nominations were given to political documentaries directly related to Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests. In particular, the 2019 ceremony was held during the siege of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and two months before the presidential election in Taiwan, encouraging many Taiwanese spectators to counter China's political and cultural hegemony by supporting the Golden Horse Awards. In 2023, the Best Documentary award was given to Youth (Spring) (2023), a new film by Wang Bing(), a director who has been "banned" in Mainland China. At the recently concluded 2024 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, the awards for Best Narrative Feature and Best Director were given to Lou Ye()'s An Unfinished Film (2024). However, Lou Ye was absent from the December awards ceremony, sparking speculation from various media outlets. Pro-government media and audiences in Mainland China criticized Lou Ye for "having the audacity to make the film but not the courage to take responsibility." Meanwhile, some objective media suggested that Lou Ye might have been restricted from traveling to Taiwan by Mainland authorities or was simply occupied as a jury member for the main competition at the Tokyo FILMeX 2024 Film Festival.

Even though Wen emphasized the purity of the GHA's selection process in interviews, it is impossible to separate the festival from the heavy historical and political significance carried by Taiwan-a crucial maritime island situated between Mainland China and Southeast Asia. As one of the most historically significant awards in the Sinophone film world, the GHA has inevitably been drawn into the multilayered political whirlpools of the region alongside Taiwan itself. As one media outlet observed, "The Golden Horse Awards, as a significant cultural event in the Chinese-speaking world, also bears a historical significance-it serves as a 'memory sanctuary' for the Chinese-speaking world. If you examine the emerging new directors recognized by the Golden Horse Awards in recent years, you will find that many of the tabooed historical memories from various regimes across the Chinese-speaking world converge on the Golden Horse stage." Thus, the relationship between the GHA and politics is mutually reinforcing and interdependent. The awards reflect political changes while offering jurors and filmmakers a relatively democratic and just platform for political expression within the Sinophone world.

The Best Documentary Feature category also played a crucial role in shaping and preserving Taiwan's cultural identity and democratic consciousness. By recognizing works that document indigenous traditions, historical injustices, and social struggles, the GHA fosters a sense

of cultural continuity and self-determination. This is particularly significant in a geopolitical context where Taiwan's sovereignty and identity are contested. Through its support of independent documentary filmmaking, the GHA affirms Taiwan's role as a cultural and creative hub within the Sinophone world. This emphasis on cultural sovereignty stands in stark contrast to the increasing homogenization of Chinese-language cinema under Mainland China's influence. When compared to other regional festivals, such as the Golden Rooster Awards and Hong Kong Film Awards, the Golden Horse Awards emerge as a unique bastion of creative freedom. The Golden Rooster Awards, often described as the "official" film festival of Mainland China, reflect the state's priorities and ideological boundaries. Politically sensitive works are effectively excluded, and filmmakers must navigate strict censorship guidelines. Similarly, the Hong Kong Film Awards, while once a platform for bold and subversive works, have faced mounting restrictions in the wake of China's National Security Law (). By contrast, the GHA's recognition of diverse and often controversial documentaries reinforces its position as a space for critical engagement and artistic resistance. This comparative freedom not only enhances the GHA's credibility but also highlights its cultural and political significance in a region where artistic expression is increasingly contested.

Conclusion

The Golden Horse Awards' Best Documentary Feature category represents much more than a celebration of cinematic achievements—it is a space where artistry, cultural identity, and political resistance converge. By amplifying voices that challenge dominant ideologies and address marginalized histories, the festival has asserted its role as a vital platform for truth-telling within the Sinophone world. Its evolution from a Cold War-era tool of state propaganda to a bastion of artistic freedom reflects both Taiwan's broader democratization and its ongoing struggles to assert cultural sovereignty. The Golden Horse Awards, as a landmark cultural platform in the Sinophone film industry, demonstrated a thematic shift in its Best Documentary category from ecological to political subjects over the decade from 2013 to 2023. This transition was not an isolated phenomenon but closely tied to the dynamic political relationships among Taiwan, Mainland China, and Hong Kong, particularly against the backdrop of democratic movements and social transformations in the region. By reviewing the evolution of the Best Documentary category, this study highlights how it both reflects and shapes the cultural and political landscapes of the Sinophone world.

As a "memory sanctuary," the Golden Horse Awards have preserved and transmitted Taiwan's cultural identity and democratic consciousness by recognizing documentaries that document social struggles and historical injustices. This has provided Taiwan, situated in a complex geopolitical environment, with more diverse voices for democratization. By supporting independent documentary filmmaking, the Golden Horse Awards underscore their role as a cultural and creative hub in the Sinophone world, standing in stark contrast to the increasing homogenization of Chinese-language cinema under Mainland China's influence. However, the GHA's independence has not come without costs. The 2018 boycott by Mainland Chinese filmmakers and the festival's exclusion from the Chinese market underscore the challenges of navigating the increasingly polarized geopolitical terrain of the Sinophone world. Yet, these pressures have only reinforced the festival's significance as an alternative cultural space—one that values artistic integrity over political expediency. The Golden Horse Awards continue to stand apart from other regional institutions, such as the

Golden Rooster Awards, by championing creative risk-taking and dissenting voices.

Ultimately, the Best Documentary Feature category encapsulates the enduring importance of the Golden Horse Awards within and beyond Taiwan. By embracing the documentary form as a tool for resistance, historical preservation, and social critique, the festival ensures that the complexities of Taiwan's identity and its place within the Sinophone cultural sphere remain visible and open to dialogue. As the Golden Horse Awards navigate their future amidst shifting sociopolitical realities, they reaffirm the transformative power of cinema to connect, resist, and remember.

Work Cited

Beyond Beauty: Taiwan from Above. Directed by Chi Po-lin. 2013.

Cotton. Directed by Zhou Hao. 2014.

The Chinese Mayor. Directed by Zhou Hao. 2015.

Le Moulin. Directed by Huang Ya-li. 2016.

Inmates. Directed by Ma Li. 2017.

Our Youth in Taiwan. Directed by Fu Yue. 2018.

Your Face. Directed by Tsai Ming-liang. 2019.

Lost Course. Directed by Jill Li. 2020.

Revolution of Our Times. Directed by Kiwi Chow. 2021.

Youth (Spring). Directed by Wang Bing. 2023.

An Unfinished Film. Directed by Lou Ye. 2024.

Berry, Chris, and Lu Xinyu, eds. The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

Chen, Kuan-Hsing. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Lin, Carol Chih-ju. "Awarding Chinese-Language Cinemas: Imaginary Transnational Identities of the Golden Horse Awards." *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 89 (Spring 2022): 18-32.

Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Ng, How Wee. "Taipei Golden Horse Film Awards and Singapore Cinema: Prestige, Privilege and Disarticulation." *Asian Cinema*, no. 1 (2020): 99-120.

Taiwan Ministry of Education. *Founding Principles of the Golden Horse Awards*. Taipei: National Archive Press, 1962.

Wen, Tien-hsiang (). Personal interview by Vince Wen, Yangyang Xu, and Nora Li, December 11, 2024.

Yau, Esther. *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Chiu, Kuei-Fen. "Mapping Taiwanese Ecodocumentary Landscape: Politics of Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics in Taiwanese Ecodocumentaries." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, no. 1 (2017): 24-26.

"China-Taiwan Tensions Overshadow Run-up to Golden Horse Awards." *Screen Daily*. <https://www.screendaily.com/features/china-taiwan-tensions-overshadow-run-up-to-golden-horse-awards/5144989.article> (accessed Dec. 18, 2024).

Kuo, Li-hsin. "Sentimentalism and the Phenomenon of Collective 'Looking Inward': A Critical Analysis of Mainstream Taiwanese Documentary." In *Documenting Taiwan on Film: Issues and Methods in New Documentaries*, edited by Sylvia Li-Chun Lin and Tze-Lan Deborah Sang, 185. London: Routledge, 2012.

Su, Ping-chi(). "A Study on Cinema Award in Institutional Changes: The Case of 'Golden Horse Award'"(). Master's thesis, National Sun Yat-sen University, 2016.

Wong, Cindy Hing-yuk. *Film Festival: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Wang, Tsun-Ming (). "Documentaries As Mirrors of Social Change in Taiwan: A Historical Analysis of the Golden Horse Award Best Documentary Films (1962-2016)" (:1962~2016). Master's thesis, National Chengchi University, 2016.

"The Cruel yet Warm World in Zhou Hao's Lens: A Discussion on the 2014 Golden Horse Award Best Documentary Cotton." (2014) Funscreen. HYPERLINK "<https://funscreen.org/article/8770>" <https://funscreen.org/article/8770> (accessed Dec.18, 2024).

"An Unfinished Film: The Golden Horse Awards as a 'Sanctuary of Memory' and Expectations for Lou Ye's Transcendence of 'Forbidden Films.'" (" " " ") WHYNOT. <https://www.wainao.me/wainao-reads/an-unfinished-film-lou-ye-12062024/> (accessed Dec.18, 2024).