

# STRAY DOGS

(Jiaoyou)

A film by  
Tsai Ming-liang



**Grand Jury Prize, Venice Film Festival  
Toronto Film Festival, Wavelength**

Taiwan/ France 2013 / 138 min / Mandarin with English subtitles / Certificate TBC

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## SYNOPSIS

Hsiao Kang is a single father who scratches out a living holding up signboards in busy roads. His two children spend their days in supermarkets before eating with their father and sleeping in an abandoned building. A worker in the supermarket starts to take the children under her wing. There are also real stray dogs for her to feed.

We come to know these characters, and something of their history, a time when they indeed had a home, a mother, a very different sort of life.



## CREW

Directed by	<b>Tsai Ming-liang</b>
Screenplay	<b>Tung Cheng-yu, Tsai Ming-liang, Peng Fei</b>
Photography	<b>Liao Pen-jung, Sung Wen-zhong</b>
Editor	<b>Lei Zhen-qing</b>
Art Direction	<b>Masa Liu, Tsai Ming-liang</b>
Set Decorator	<b>Li Yufeng</b>
Costume Designer	<b>Wang Chia-hui</b>
Sound	<b>Mark Ford</b>
Sound Designer	<b>Tu Duu-chih, Kuo Li-chi</b>
Assistant Director	<b>Feng Fiu</b>
Production Manager	<b>Chen Wei-jie</b>

Produced by	<b>Vincent Wang</b>
Co-producers	<b>Jacques Bidou, Marianne Dumoulin</b>

**A Homegreen Films, JBA Prods. Production in association with House On Fire, Urban Distribution Intl.**

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ANGOA

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## CAST

**Lee Kang-sheng**

**Lee Yi-chieh**

**Lee Yi-cheng**

**Yang Kuei-mei**

**Lu Yi-ching**

**Chen Shiang-chyi**

**Wu Jin-kai**

Taiwan / France 2013 / 138 minutes / Digital 2K, 1:1.85 / Mandarin with English Subtitles

Photos from [www.newwavefilms.co.uk/press](http://www.newwavefilms.co.uk/press)

## TSAI MING-LIANG

Tsai Ming-liang was born in Malaysia in 1957. He is one of the most prominent film directors of the new cinema movement in Taiwan that started in the early 1990s, using the same actor, Lee Kang -sheng, in film after film. In 1994, his film *Vive L'Amour* was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. All his feature films have been selected by either the Cannes, Berlin or Venice film festivals. In 2009, the Louvre Museum invited him to make the first fiction feature film for their collection "Le Louvre s'offre aux cineastes": *Face (Visage)* became a benchmark for filmmakers venturing into the art world.

In 2012, the slow walking performance by Lee Kang-sheng, originally from a stage play, was developed into the "slow walking Long March" series of short films, which includes *No Form, Walker, Sleepwalk, Diamond Sutra* and *Journey to the West*. These short films were made in different cities and across different fields, combining cinema, performance and installations to present an intellectual criticism of the endless pursuit of contemporary life. *Stray Dogs* and *Journey to the West* are his latest ventures into cinema.

### Selected filmography

2013 ***Stray Dogs*** Winner of the Grand Jury Prize Silver Lion award at the Venice Film Festival

2009 ***Face*** - In competition at the Cannes Film Festival

2006 ***I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*** – In competition at the Venice Film Festival

2004 ***The Wayward Cloud*** – Winner of the Silver Bear, Alfred Bauer Award and FIPRESCI Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival

2003 ***Goodbye, Dragon Inn*** – Winner of the FIPRESCI Prize at the Venice Film Festival

2002 ***The Skywalk Is Gone***

2001 ***What Time is it There?*** - Winner of Technical Achievement Award at the Cannes Film Festival

1998 ***The Hole*** – Winner of the FIPRESCI Prize at the Cannes Film Festival

1997 ***The River*** – Winner of the Silver Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival

1994 ***Vive l'Amour*** – Winner of the Golden Lion award and FIPRESCI Prize at Venice Film Festival

1992 ***Rebels of the Neon God*** – Winner of the Best First Film Award at Festival des 3 Continents

## AN INTERVIEW WITH TSAI MING-LIANG

by Charles Tesson (Artistic Director of the Critics' Week in Cannes)

**In *Stray Dogs*, you return to Taipei, the city that appeared a lot in your early works (including *Rebels of the Neon God*, *Vive l'Amour*, *The River*, and *The Hole*), but this time, the theme you present is even more miserable. It concerns the vicissitudes of sustaining life (finding food and shelter) and the breaking up of families. Does this mean you have changed your opinion about the situation in Taiwan?**

The world seems to change all the time, and yet it seems never to have changed. All the problems remain, and become worse: poverty, starvation, war, power, desire, avarice, hatred... Maybe I am getting older now. When shooting this film, I often thought of one expression from Lao Tsu, "Heaven and Earth do not act out of benevolence; they treat all things as sacrificial straw dogs." [*Dao De Jing*, Ch. 5] Those poor people and their children seem to have been abandoned by the world, but they still have to live. On the other hand, those who have power and influence seem to me to have forgotten about this world. They work incessantly on never-ending construction, but they do not know when destruction will arrive.

**Generally speaking, in cinematography, images are constructed to develop a story. At the beginning of *Stray Dogs*, however, you use a series of long takes, which break up the structure of the film and create a feeling of discontinuity. In film, cinematography is the main element (light, colour, the angle and texture of image, and the length of the take). As we scrutinize the details of every scene, the story starts to grow in our minds. How did you come up with the idea of using form as structure, and using long takes and few story frames to make narrative form? The combination makes *Stray Dogs* intense and distinctive.**

Basically, my recent works have departed more and more from narrative, let alone storytelling. I've exhausted my appetite for film as a mere tool for storytelling.

In *Stray Dogs*, from the screenplay to the shooting to the cutting, the most important task was to reduce narrative, to abandon what may be called "plot." There's no direct connection between one scene and the next, and so there is a feeling like there's no beginning and no end, but it also presents a mood of the rupture of the immediate, which is very vital. Each scene is a completed action of the actor which passes in real time, capturing the flow of the natural light and shadow and the changes of the background sounds. I like it very much. The structure of the whole film has no beginning and no end.

**The film starts with the strongly contrasting experiences of the real world: clean (a cleaned and fully-stocked supermarket) and filthy; a residence and an abandoned house; ruins and city, or the mix of wilderness. The setting for the scene with the boat on a rainy night reminds me of the episode from Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* in which the children row a boat to escape (in this film, by contrast, it is the father floating away alone in a boat, and the children being protected by a mother figure on the riverbank). Suddenly, the film switches to a timeless story of fate: the daughter in bed tells a cruel story of fate (an oppressed frog prince hopes for a king), which I associate with the poem the father recites. Usually, in your films, once the characters start to have the idea of escaping, fantasies or scenes of singing and dancing arise. But this film is an exception. Why did you choose this darker direction?**

*The Night of the Hunter* is one of my favourite films. The brother and sister escaped from Robert Mitchum's claws, got on a boat and floated along the river; all those images bring us back to remote and mysterious childhood dreams.... It is a film whose pure cinematography cannot be surpassed, and it could not be improved upon. I hope no one will ever re-film it.

In my recent films, I have tended to use the classic Chinese songs I like or a little light-hearted and jovial song and dance number to transform the tedious, heavy atmosphere. However, there's nothing like that in *Stray Dogs*, only Lee Kang Sheng's face, starting to swell after he has passed forty, and his figure which is gradually getting out of control. I am like the distorted, scary Robert Mitchum. I set a trap for Kang in 1991; I've been waiting earnestly for 20 years, and finally he has given me a startlingly remarkable performance.

Aren't I dark?

**Can we say that *Stray Dogs* dwells in deep melancholy, and that the embodiment of this melancholy lies in the mural (the scenery of mountains and rivers, rushing streams and riverbeds), which makes the characters in the film enchanted, desperate, but also sorrowful and gloomy?**

The mural in the ruins was discovered during the location search and I was deeply struck by it when I first laid eyes on it. On one whole wall of a crumbling house the familiar landscape in Taiwan is portrayed in charcoal pencil. It is like standing in front of a mirror, looking at the farther shore in the mirror. It is both real and surreal. It is both close at hand and far away on the horizon. If everyone has an ideal world in their heart, a perfect farther shore, a place deep in their soul: isn't it right there?

I shot two scenes in front of this mural, and both of them exceeded the length of all my other scenes. How much reflection on life can a wall like this, or a mirror, give rise to in us?

**It is unusual to see children in your films. How did you work with children this time? In the film the adults cry (the father reciting poetry with tears flowing, and the woman crying at the end), but the children never do. If they were abandoned, they would survive by themselves. Do you hold an optimistic attitude towards this? Because they do not fall into the adults' depression nor their sorrow at the mural?**

The two children are Kang's nephew and niece. We are very close. The sister had never acted before. She resisted strongly at the beginning, but she behaved vibrantly in front of the lens, and didn't need to be taught about acting, so I let them play. They were like two little ghosts, not knowing the sorrow in the world, and had fun of their own. I was like that when I was little.

This time, I also loosened my reins with the adults, and the length of time was mostly under their own control. I particularly like some of the meaningless, blank moments when they stood somewhere and looked absent-minded.

**The sound effects Tu Duu Chih has created for *Stray Dogs* are outstanding. At the beginning of the film, when Lee Kang Sheng rows a boat into the thickets of long grass, the background sound of noisy traffic is used to establish that the scene is at the edge of a city. Usually, as at the end, the scenes that take place where the two main characters reside are silent. We can only hear a rumbling noise from outside the scene or outside the shot. How do you design and plan such an effect?**

The sound effects in *Stray Dogs* were all recorded on location. When we went to the sound studio, I asked them to recover all the background sounds, including the breaths of the actors, which adds a kind of rough, violent feeling to the film.

**An important scene in the film is where the father comes home and finds out that the children are gone, and that there is only a cabbage doll's head left in the bed. The scene implies that despair and crazy love could lead to infanticide (cannibalism, devouring). How did you direct this scene, the performance of the actor, and the other elements (the lighting, shooting and so on)? Did you rehearse many times? Did you shoot many takes? Or not?**

I gave him a cabbage and told him to eat it, and it turned out that the first time was okay; otherwise, he would have had to eat a second cabbage.

**In this film you work once again with four cherished actors. They have worked with you many times, and have won many international film prizes and awards. What do you feel about the loyalty of actors, and their willingness to accept all kinds of characters and change their appearance constantly? In particular, this time Lee Kang Sheng was challenged to play a father, a role he had never performed before?**

The four actors in *Stray Dogs* have been part of my company for more than 20 years. I love them very much, and they must love me a lot too, because every time I start a new film, they come back to me. This is also my most important motivation for making a film.

Maybe they've never been my ticket to riches, and I've never been able to make them rich; but every time we make a pretty good film, and each one is always more mature than the last. If *Stray Dogs* were to be my last film, none of us would have any regrets.



### **Why do you name the film after the episode with the supermarket worker feeding stray dogs in the ruins?**

The setting for the whole film is ruins. In the ruins, there are dogs and people. People act like dogs, and dogs like people; they are free dogs, and also free people.

They have nothing, but what about us? What do we possess? Do we really possess anything? Maybe we all are nothing more than stray dogs.

### **How do you regard films in Taiwan at present? The film industry in China is rising and flourishing, and rather appealing; however, it is also gradually squeezing and destroying the original film scenes of Hong Kong and Taiwan. What is your take on this? And how do you find your place in it?**

I am the least qualified person to talk about Taiwanese films, Chinese films, Hong Kong films, Asian films, and world films because my standpoint is different. The films people talk about are market-oriented. My films are not about opening up the market. Many people ask me who I make my films for, and I don't know either. But I've lived long enough; so long that I feel tired, and I don't want to make films anymore. Maybe all the things I want to film are already filmed.

## **NOTES FROM TSAI MING-LIANG**

### **The Human Billboard**

Ten years ago, I saw a man on the streets of Taipei, holding up a sign to advertise tour packages. I was astonished by the sight and filled with questions as I observed him at the traffic light. How long was he going to stand there? How much will he earn? Where does he go if he needs the toilet? Will he run into his friends and relatives? Will he be ashamed if he sees them? What is on his mind? He is like a telephone pole or a wall or a tree. No one notices him, and he doesn't care. Soon afterwards, this industry mushroomed, and human billboards could be seen everywhere, holding up signs that advertised real estate. More and more people had lost their jobs and taken up this new profession of holding up signboards for real estate companies. It was as if their time had become worthless.

A thought came to my mind then: I wanted Hsiao Kang to play such a character.

Three years ago, I received a screenplay about middle-age unemployment and domestic violence. It reminded me of that man I saw in the streets.

### **The Poem:**

#### **"Man Jiang Hong"**

The people who work as human billboards are given a ten-minute break every fifty minutes, during which they can drink or visit the washroom. They work eight hours a day holding up a signboard, and are not allowed to do anything else during their shift. I have seen some of them muttering to themselves, but I could never make out what they were saying. So in my film, I made Hsiao Kang sing "Man Jiang Hong" (literally A River Filled with Red), a patriotic poem written by the famous Song Dynasty general, Yue Fei, who defended his country against the invasion of the Jin Tribe. The poem expresses Yue Fei's fierce loyalty towards his country and his frustrations at being unable to accomplish his mission. Anyone above the age of forty in Taiwan would be familiar with this poem, and I had actually heard Hsiao Kang sing it once before.

### **Ruins**

The fast paced and Western influenced development of Asian cities gives me the feeling that we are in a state of constant anxiety and uncertainty, as if we were drifting without any solid foundation beneath us. We seem to be living inside a huge construction site, with houses and roads and the subway constantly being refurbished or demolished and rebuilt. And the more development there is, the more things there are which get discarded. I have never shied away from such scenes in my films, whether it's showing construction sites where the concrete is rising up, or older buildings abandoned and left in ruins. They remind us of the cruel and absurd price we pay for the rapid development of modern civilization, an exchange that verges on insanity.

Stray Dogs is about a single-parent family without a mother. This family doesn't even have a home in fact. Father, son and daughter move from one abandoned building to another. All the abandoned ruins seen in my film seem

to have been waiting for me for ages. I see each of them as living characters in my film. I found them, and I listened to the stories that they told me.

While scouting for locations, I discovered a large landscape painting on a wall of one of these buildings, which was quite a surprise. It was a very moving sight. Perhaps this painting was the facial expression of this lonely city. Or perhaps it was a mirror, reflecting both the illusion and the reality of our human world. I had no idea who the artist was, but I knew I had to film it. I asked my crew to protect it, but they had no way of guaranteeing that protection, because anyone could enter the abandoned building freely. Therefore I could only pray for its safety. It was only during post-production that I found out that the artist was called Kao Jun Honn. He had begun painting inside many abandoned buildings in recent years. Interestingly, he told me that he had no intention of exhibiting these paintings. He only wished that people would encounter them by chance, the same way I had encountered his painting by chance.

Even more interestingly, this particular painting was based on an old photograph that was taken in 1871 by an Englishman named John Thomson. It showed the primitive landscape of southern Taiwan from over a century ago. In the original photograph, there were two Taiwanese aboriginal children standing in the left corner, but Kao had chosen to exclude them in his painting. Coincidentally, there are also two children roaming around the abandoned building in my film.

**Yang Kuei Mei**

**Lu Yi Ching**

**Chen Shiang Chyi**

Initially, there was only one female character in the script, a character who enters Hsiao Kang's family and takes the children away from him. I had originally intended for Lu Yi Ching to play the role, but I fell very sick later on, sick enough that I felt I might die at any moment. Fearing that *Stray Dogs* could be my last film, and that I may never have the chance to work with Yang Kuei Mei and Chen Shiang Chyi again, a wild idea suddenly hit me. Why not let all three women play the same character? However, by the end of shooting, it didn't seem to matter anymore if they were playing the same character or not. I will be happy if this film should end up being my final curtain call, because I have enjoyed having my actors by my side. In fact, they have always stayed by my side, no matter how small their role may be, and I am grateful for that.





## Hsiao Kang (Lee Kang-sheng)

If it were not for Hsiao Kang, I probably wouldn't have made this film.

I have become tired of cinema. The so-called entertainment value of films in recent years, the mechanisms of the market, and the constant pandering to popular taste, all disgust me. I don't feel the need to keep making films or, to put it more bluntly, to make the kinds of films that expect the patronage of cinema audiences anymore. I keep asking myself: what is cinema? Why make films? Who am I doing this for? Who is the mass audience? Are they the people who watch Spielberg movies? Frankly speaking, I am not interested in this at all.

In 2011, I collaborated with Hsiao Kang on a play for the stage. While rehearsing a scene in which he had to walk very slowly, I was so moved by his performance that I said to him, "Kang, we've worked together for 20 years and this is the moment we've been waiting for."

Theatre performances are transient. They end when the curtain falls. I suddenly had the impulse to make a film again and therefore began working on a short film series of Hsiao Kang's "slow-walking expedition". I wanted to keep filming Hsiao Kang's face, and I wanted to see it very close up. How has this face changed over the last twenty years, under the constant gaze of the camera? Or rather, what has this face revealed over those years? *Stray Dogs* took me three years to make, from scripting to editing, and in the process, I found myself constantly paring down the story, cutting away plots, narrative, structure, and even characters. All that remains is this face, a face completely revealed by certain behaviour. In one of the shots, I gave Hsiao Kang a head of cabbage and told him to eat it in front of the camera. I don't remember the instructions I gave him. Perhaps I gave him none. I watched him eat the cabbage calmly and quietly, with a tinge of pity and regret, sorrow and loneliness, a sense of satisfaction and sourness, a sense of violent eruption... He chewed and bit and shoved and chomped and devoured the cabbage, with mixed feelings of love and hate. I watched him consume that head of cabbage with twenty years of his life. He cried, and I cried too. We have worked together from 1991 to 2012, and all I can say is this - His face is my Cinema.

