

Film Notes

TAIPEI EXCHANGES
(第36個故事)DIRECTED BY:
HSIAO YA-CHUAN (蕭雅全)STARRING:
GUAI LUN-MEI (桂綸鎂) AS DORIS,
ZAIZAI LIN (林辰唏) AS JOSIE,
CHANG HAN (張翰) AS CHOULANGUAGE:
MANDARIN AND ENGLISH WITH
CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLESRUNNING TIME:
86 MINUTESTAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAYPennies for their
thoughts

PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA



'Taipei Exchanges'
juxtaposes
capitalism against
a more idealistic
way of life in the
form of two sisters,
one practical, the
other utopian

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Taipei has recently been portrayed as an exotic landscape for a Swedish mother and her son in *Miss Kicki* (麗虹心) and as a city of romance in *Au Revoir Taipei* (一頁台北). Now comes television commercial director Hsiao Ya-chuan's (蕭雅全) *Taipei Exchanges* (第36個故事), which was commissioned by the Taipei City Government's Department of Information and Tourism (台北市觀光傳播局). The movie attempts to downplay the city's reputation as a center of capitalism populated by money-grubbing consumers by limiting much of the action to a cafe where an idealistic young woman opens a side business based on bartering.

The film begins with Doris (Guai Lun-mei, 桂綸鎂) fulfilling a dream by opening a coffee shop in an artsy

neighborhood. Doris wants the store to look elegant and tasteful, but after a party to celebrate the establishment of her business she finds it piled with odd gifts such as a recipe written in Thai, a wig and a life-sized, anatomically correct doll.

These unwanted housewarming presents give Doris' sassy younger sister Josie (Zaizai Lin, 林辰唏) the idea to run a bartering business out of their shop. Soon Doris' dream comes to look more like a warehouse than a cafe.

Doris, the more pragmatic of the two sisters, decides to put up with Josie's shenanigans as more and more customers are drawn to the cafe looking for things to exchange. "They will order more coffee when they try to figure out what they want to barter with," Josie says to Doris.

One day, a man named Chou (Chang Han, 張翰) walks into the store and wants to exchange the 35 bars of soap he has collected from 35 different countries for something, but he's not sure what that something is. Chou becomes a regular at Doris' coffee shop, and each time he visits, the traveler recounts a story about one of the bars of soap.

Captivated by Chou's stories, Doris starts to dream again. Only this time, in her dreams she is visiting the places Chou has been talking about, encountering people and having experiences that will give her her own stories to tell.

Given its director's background in an environment that prizes efficiency, *Taipei Exchanges* paints a surprisingly sweet, romantic portrait of a Taipei where capitalism is superseded by a barter economy, and memory and

relationships are more valuable than commerce and commodity. The film neatly plays with the two distinct value systems as represented by the two sisters, one practical, the other utopian, and aims for a reconciliation between the two.

The movie is well-crafted, and its fairy-tale feel is charmingly enhanced by artist Wu Meng-yun's (吳孟雲) child-like illustrated art, and a warm, comforting score by Summer Lei (雷光夏) and Ho Zhi-jian (侯志堅). The narrative flow is sometimes interrupted by footage of street interviews with real-life Taipei residents, who comment on the choices Doris makes in the film.

But with 80 percent of the film taking place inside the coffee shop, Hsiao stretches his already thin material a bit too much and loses the momentum he

would have needed to make a serious statement. Much like the pretty drawings and postcards on display in the cafe, the film's characters seem to live exclusively in delightful vignettes that are inspired by the real world but not truly rooted in it.

Doris' Coffee Shop (朵兒咖啡館) was built from scratch by the film crew in an old apartment on Taipei's tree-lined Fujin Street (富錦街), an area that is home to an assortment of interesting boutiques and other shops. It became a real coffee shop after the shooting of the film, and it wouldn't be much of a surprise if this stylish cafe becomes a popular tourist attraction after *Taipei Exchanges* hits theaters across the country.

In case you were wondering, no, you can't trade in your old toaster for someone else's discarded teddy bear at Doris' Coffee Shop. That's just in the movie.