

Title of the Essay

Short description of what's in the essay

Thesis

While the two movies share some small superficial similarities, the two movies' respective narrative styles are as different as can be.

Taxing

A Taxing Woman is a rather straightforward story in which Ryoko Itakura (Nobuko Miyamoto), a dedicated agent of the Japanese Revenue Service, plays the leading role in pursuing Hideki Gondo (Tsutomu Yamazaki) in an investigation spanning a number of years.

Juzo's film is one of satire, of dripping irony, and wastes no time establishing its motives. The movie opens with depictions of just how callous the Japanese can be when engaging in their under-the-table activities, from kickbacks for the dying man's wet nurse in exchange for his signature seal, to shady apartment buyouts, to tax dodges from common mom-and-pop stores. Even Gondo himself, a veteran of the business underworld, cannot help but laugh at the sheer absurdity of the situation when a man offers to launder a half million dollars via a winning lottery ticket--for a ten percent fee, of course.

Taxing is almost forcibly direct--the movie follows a traditional storytelling motif, a linear tale following a single protagonist and a single adversary.

However, the film leaves a number of questions unanswered. As Gondo writes the number of a safe deposit box in his own blood on a saved paper napkin of Ryoko's, is offering at the end of *Taxing* an indication of a fondness he held for her throughout the investigation? Could it have been another ruse on his part, the latest of countless last-ditch attempts to save his fortune? Or perhaps it is symbolic, representing the government bleeding the citizenry dry. For that matter, given Juzo's obvious opinion of the Japanese tax system, one gets the impression that Gondo is really the good guy in the story, if not a reflection of Juzo himself.

The workings of the system in *Taxing* are so mechanical that Juzo includes Ryoko's cowlick as a running joke, as if to remind the Japanese audience that yes, they are indeed still people. Similarly, Gondo is portrayed as single-minded in his determination to keep his fortune; his love and business lives meld into a single world of sex and yen.

(Perhaps this story found some unspoken influence on the Coen brothers when they wrote *Fargo*: the parallels between Ryoko Itakura and Marge Gunderson are only eclipsed as those between Hideki Gondo and Jerry Lundergaard.)

Chungking

Chungking Express is essentially two movies in one, linked by a common theme but little else. The first "episode" revolves around He Zhiwu (AKA 223, played by Takeshi Kaneshiro), and his failed attempts to alternately deny and get over his recent breakup with his girlfriend Meg. While drinking his troubles

away he vows to fall for the first woman who enters--an anonymous drug runner in dark shades and a blond wig (Bridgette Lin) who clearly has more pressing issues at hand, such as assassinating the barkeep who double-crossed her. The second involves a nameless officer No. 663 (Tony Leung), who is also attempting to get past a recently ended relationship, while a deli worker (Faye Wong) takes an unrequited liking to him, to the extent of sneaking into his apartment while he is on duty using a key entrusted to her by 663's ex-girlfriend. While both stories involve nameless police officers, there is evidence that even this was not meant to be a common motif: a third segment involving a love-sick hitman was originally meant to be included into *Chungking* but was cut, later to be spun off into a movie of its own in 1995's *Fallen Angels* (Wikipedia).

While *Taxing* makes a point of fleshing out the characters involved, *Chungking* seems to deliberately shroud its characters in anonymity. Indeed as Shum (2003) points out, the character in the first segment who receives the most attention is Meg, whom is never seen. In fact, by the end of the film the only named characters are Faye and Hu. As if this were not enough, the second cop's number is famously displayed alternately as 633 and 663 although this is generally regarded as an oversight on Wong's part, perhaps a victim of the two month time frame in which the movie was filmed.

Pacing in the movies are similarly inverted. Where *Taxing* features relatively long, slow scenes paralleling the long time from in which the movie takes

place, *Chungking* is such a whirlwind of stop-motion film, employing stop-motion, blurred chase sequences and split-second cuts that one almost feels dizzy without Dramamine.

Bridgette Lin in the movie at the end of her career, just before her retirement. In contrast, Faye appears near the beginning of hers. While she had gained steady popularity since her debut in 1989, *Tien Kong*, the 1994 album (which incidentally contains a Mandarin)

--except perhaps for a strong dislike for The Mamas and the Papas.

Where *Taxing* carried with it a strong motif of bringing the irony of the Japanese tax system to light, it is hard to say if *Chungking* has any moral at all--Shum posits that the film is about Chinese identity, but it could just as well simply be two random love stories of two random people. Perhaps this is what makes *Chungking* so much more difficult to digest. It is nearly impossible to comprehend on the first viewing--indeed, it wasn't until my second time around that I realized that the lady in the wig was not Faye and that the stories were not an interrelated whole.