



# Enter the Ip Man zone

*A fictionalized account of the early life of a kung fu pioneer, Wilson Yip's latest movie shows that portraying the martial art on the big screen can be both realistic and entertaining*

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER



Before Bruce Lee (李小龍), there was Ip Man (葉問). The grandmaster of the wing chun (詠春) style of martial arts, Ip Man was Lee's *sifu* (師傅), or master.

*Ip Man* (葉問) is also the name of a film, by Hong Kong action director Wilson Yip (葉偉信), that is aimed at rekindling interest in the master teacher and the 200-year-old martial arts school.

Starring Donnie Yen (甄子丹) as Ip and ace thespians Simon Yam (任達華) and Lam Ka-tung (林家棟), the kung fu flick is loosely based on Ip Man's early life and is bound to become an action movie legend itself, recalling the past glory of kung fu cinema before CGI effects and "wire-fu" cine spoiled all the fun.

In this fictionalized biopic, Ip Man (Yen) is portrayed as the best of the best in 1930s Foshan, China, a bustling city and home to countless martial arts schools keen to recruit new disciples. Ip Man, an unassuming aristocrat who spends much of his time perfecting his skills, however, never intends to show off kung fu in public and keeps his fighting behind closed doors so as to protect those who might challenge him from the embarrassment of defeat.

The sense of jocundity that dominates the opening half-hour disappears with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war. After the Japanese occupy Foshan, the population shrinks from 300,000 to 70,000. In order to support his family living in destitution, Ip Man finds work at a coal mine along with other martial artists, where they are offered bags of rice by Japanese general Miura (Hiroyuki Ikeuchi) if they can win duels against Japanese fighters. But there's a catch: one may be beaten to death.

Torn between his commitment to his family and his love for his countrymen, Ip Man chooses to fight, taking on Miura in an adrenaline-pumping final battle.

The story is the usual old-school Hong Kong fare, with drama centered on the villainous Japanese pushing around the Chinese and the rebellion of the martial-arts hero who faces his oppressors and kindles patriotism. Fortunately, in the skilled hands of director Yip, what may have been an over-the-top remake is graced by an old-fashioned feel that conjures up the past glory of kung fu cinema. The narrative is smooth and seamlessly moves the plot forward.

Fine storytelling aside, kung fu is at

the center of the film. To the credit of action director and veteran martial arts star Sammo Hung (洪金寶), *Ip Man* is a far cry from the modern-day "wire fu" jammed with unrealistic special effects. Always delivered from close range, the fight scenes show Chinese martial arts as poetry in motion and elicit the "wow-effect" through virtuosity rather than visual stunts.

Kung fu is also in its most diverse form in Hung's masterfully choreographed action sequences that range from private fights at home and Japanese dojo combat to a factory melee and a ringside duel. Various practitioners from different schools also get in on the action besides the invincible wing chun grandmaster.

Yen triumphs in taking a calm, zen-like approach to his Ip Man. He appears graceful and dignified, showing precise control and with each strike allures the audience to the minimalist and non-aggressive style of wing chun.

*Ip Man* cements Yen's status as the world's leading martial arts star. Fans and action junkies will be holding their breath to see if the martial artist and actor can outdo himself in a sequel that is already in the works.

## OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

### Gran Torino

Clint Eastwood directs and stars in this drama about a crusty, racist, epithet-spewing Korean War vet who is less than impressed with having Asians as neighbors. But Clint the director has a surprise in store. They are Hmong, a people who backed the US during the Vietnam War. Eventually he comes to know the family, and gets involved when violence comes knocking. The title refers to the main character's prized car that he must care for and defend — and perhaps what it represents in a wider sense. Glowing reviews — and some debate — accompanied this latest effort from a legendary American actor-director.



### Departures

This is the Japanese entry that beat *Waltz With Bashir* to the Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film. A cellist returns to his old home in the country with his wife and finds a job as a handler of corpses in preparation for their display at funerals. His challenge is not so much the sometimes-gruesome work, which he becomes captivated by, as reconciling his inner demons with the demands of family and face. It's an offbeat, humorous and carefully detailed film that will delight those who want to see something unusual. Japanese title: *Okuribito*.



### Confessions of a Shopaholic

Released in the wake of the economic disaster, this film suffers from an immediate loss of orientation in the same way that *Collateral Damage* did in depicting pre-Sept. 11 terrorism. Isla Fisher (the dynamic Aussie star of *Wedding Crashers*) is the confessor of the title, a New York tomboy who simply can't afford to shop like there's no tomorrow — but does anyway. Directed by fellow Australian P.J. Hogan of *Muriel's Wedding* fame, though fans of that benchmark Aussie comedy-drama might struggle to find similar sophistication here.



### Defiance

Daniel Craig stars as one of four Belarusian brothers who set up a forest-based Jewish community that resists the Nazis in this recreation of a remarkable true story. Narrowly escaping from the Germans, the brothers head to the woods, only to be joined by a growing number of refugees. Eventually their numbers reach well over 1,000, and a mini-society forms as the threat lurks around them. Craig's fans will have a good time, and there's just enough action for it to be called a war movie. Directed by Edward Zwick (*Glory, Blood Diamond*), who can't seem to resist worthy subjects.



### K-20: Legend of the Mask

A superhero film of sorts, *K-20* rises above the pool of Japanese manga-based movies. Takeshi Kaneshiro (金城武) is a circus performer who is fingered for the crimes of a supervillain, but he escapes detention and sets out to clear his name by snaring "K-20," his newfound nemesis. A strange retro urban setting (World War II never took place in the Japan of this film) is the canvas for a spectacular fight between whimsical good and eccentric evil.



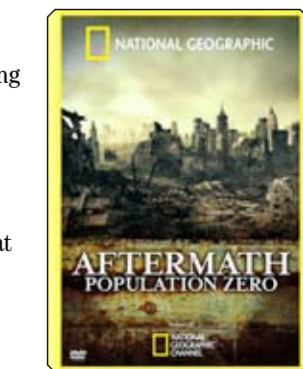
### Mapado 2

In the first *Mapado* (2005), a couple of lowlifes (gangster and crooked cop) arrived on a strange island in search of a woman with the key to a fortune but ended up getting comically nasty treatment from a group of elderly women. In this sequel from 2007, the ex-cop is back on an assignment and ends up again on the island by accident, again suffering at the hands of the five aggressive grannies, one of whom may carry a lucrative secret. Both films were surprise box office hits in South Korea. Also known as *Mapado 2: Back to the Island*, this is showing at Ximending's Baixue theater.



### Aftermath: Population Zero

The Scholar multiplex in Taipei and the second-run Wonderful Cinemas in Taichung are offering this made-for-cable National Geographic mockumentary for those who can't get enough of the apocalypse (or don't have cable). Anthro-apocalypse, that is. This film is not interested in how humankind perishes, but what would happen to the world in our absence if we simply vanished. Pets, cities, the environment, nuclear power plants ... you get the picture. Desolation special effects abound. Narrated by Reg E. Cathey of TV's *The Wire*.



## Running on empty

*In Ismene Ting's directorial debut, an embittered woman's journey to self-realization follows a straightforward path*

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan's renowned stage director and actress, playwright and core member of the Performance Workshop (表演工作坊), Ismene Ting (丁乃箏) makes a foray into cinema with her directorial debut *Finding Shangri-La* (這兒是香格里拉).

Produced by theater doyen Stan Lai (賴聲川), the film about a woman's inner journey generates interest and anticipation, but the moviemakers' rather feeble command of cinematic language restrains the voyage from evolving fully.

The introspective journey begins with Jee Ling (Zhu Zhiying, 朱芷瑩), a well-off housewife and mother living in Taipei who has yet to come to terms with the loss of her child two years previously in a hit-and-run car accident. Denied justice as the driver got off scot-free because of insufficient evidence, the embittered Jee Ling's marriage is on the verge of disintegration as unresolved frustration and anger alienate her husband.

One day at home, Jee Ling discovers a clue her deceased son left for the treasure hunt game they once enjoyed playing together. The young mother decides to follow the clue and embarks on a quest to find a sacred mountain in the mystical land



Promising young star Zhu Zhiying, left, leaves much to the imagination in *Finding Shangri-La*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PERFORMANCE WORKSHOP FILMS

of Shangri-La, in Yunnan Province.

A couple of encounters in the secluded paradise gradually transform the heroine. A mysterious young man named Alex (Matt Wu, 吳中天) awakens Jee Ling to her desires and passion. However, it takes a Tibetan boy who is as wise as a sage to open Jee Ling's heart. Revelations come in the form of

dreams and visions that guide her to regain inner peace and the strength to forgive and love again.

Adapted from the musical of the same title directed by Ting in 2000, the film is built on a promising quasi-feminist narrative about a woman's inner transformation. Yet the director's approach to storytelling is rather plain, if not

completely unimaginative, and more often than not, her characters appear less than flesh and blood.

Mostly shot on location in Shangri-La County (香格里拉縣), Yunnan, the film received a special mention for its director of photography at the Cairo International Film Festival in November last year. Instead of

actively helping to shape the characters' psyches and the unfolding story line, the breathtaking landscape, however, is an inert backdrop.

Young actress Zhu delivers a passable performance as the tormented heroine, which shows that she has plenty of work to do before she begins to shine on screen.

Cast for a leading role in stage director Lai's epic production *A Dream Like a Dream* (如夢之夢) in 2005, Zhu was subsequently noticed by Ang Lee (李安) and landed a supporting role in *Lust, Caution* (色戒).

### Film Notes

#### FINDING SHANGRI-LA (這兒是香格里拉)

DIRECTED BY: ISMENE TING (丁乃箏)

STARRING: ZHU ZHIYING (朱芷瑩) AS JEE LING, MATT WU (吳中天) AS ALEX

LANGUAGE: IN CHINESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY