



## 'Empire of Silver' shortchanges audiences

*The world of finance is barren ground for a good story in Christina Yao's big-budget period drama about the Wall Street of imperial China*

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

Taiwanese IT tycoon Terry Gou's (郭台銘) first foray into film funding, *Empire of Silver* (白銀帝國), has generated hype galore since shooting began in 2006. Three years, 46 locations and NT\$400 million later, the period drama about an affluent banking family in Shanxi Province is a decent but less-than-impressive movie directed by Christina Yao (姚樹華), a Taiwan-born theater scholar, director and writer who has worked at theatrical companies and universities here and in the US.

The story centers on the powerful Kang family in late 19th-century China. Led by Lord Kang (China's Zhang Tielin, 張鐵林), the family-run banking empire single-handedly built up what has come to be known as the Wall Street of imperial China through managing funds and issuing money orders.

Third Master (Aaron Kwok, 郭富城) is Lord Kang's debauched and least favorite son. After his brothers meet with a series of tragic accidents, he becomes heir apparent to the clan's mighty enterprise.

Aside from possessing neither the ambition nor the aptitude to become a successful businessman, Third Master's conflict with his father involves his young Western-educated stepmother, Madam Kang (Hao Lei, 郝蕾), a diplomat's daughter. She taught Third Master English and the two fell deeply in love before Lord Kang stepped in and stole the fair maiden.

The son embarks on a self-imposed exile in the desert, only to return upon hearing the news of his stepmother's death. Meanwhile, as foreign intervention and civil war weakens the tottering Qing Dynasty, the economic meltdown that ensues forces Third Master to take the reins and lead his family.

Honed by top filmmaking professionals, including artistic consultants William Chang (張叔平) and Yee Chung-man (奚仲文), cinematographer Anthony Pun (潘耀明) and editor Liao Ching-sung (廖慶松), the film has an immaculately polished look

and shows unforgiving attention to the smallest detail in its profile of the affluent family. Reams of research went into the art direction — all of the antiques and artifacts used in the film are reported to be genuine.

The period's banking operations are revealed in an early scene in which branch managers from across China gather in Lord Kang's courtyard, waiting for their yearly bonuses to be announced after a ceremony that involves rows of abacuses. The Kang family's luxurious lifestyle is eloquently painted and contrasted with the destitute world inhabited by the poor and the sick

outside the clan compound's stone walls.

Inside, a familial war is played out in silence between Lord Kang, the autocratic patriarch, Third Master, the conflicted son, and Madam Kang, the wife who goes as far as to cut out her own uterus as an act of rebellion. Such sober human drama recalls Zhang Yimou's (張藝謀) 1991 masterpiece *Raise the Red Lantern* (大紅燈籠高高掛) and its focus on the repression of women.

Yet *Empire of Silver* fails to become a contemporarily relevant and absorbing story. Based on Chinese writer Cheng Yi's (成一) three-volume novel *The Silver*

### Film Notes

#### EMPIRE OF SILVER (白銀帝國)

**DIRECTED BY:** CHRISTINA YAO (姚樹華)

**STARRING:** AARON KWOK (郭富城) AS THIRD MASTER, ZHANG TIELIN (張鐵林) AS LORD KANG, HAO LEI (郝蕾) AS MADAM KANG

**LANGUAGE:** IN MANDARIN AND ENGLISH WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:** 112 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY

*Valley* (白銀谷), the epic tale spans from late imperial to early Republican China and takes in the Boxer Rebellion (義和團) along the way. But unlike the tumultuous backdrop, the world of banking proves to be barren ground for drama.

None of the characters is fully explored. The film's story lines and themes vie for the audience's attention and end up obscuring the narrative. On the one hand, there is the ideological clash between Confucian teachings and profit-driven pragmatism. On the other, we have the son experiencing a coming-of-age adventure in the Gobi Desert that involves a pack of wolves. Towards the end of the film, when their characters bid farewell to each other, the two romantic leads, Kwok and Hao, turn in stiff performances that are more soap opera than movie magic, appearing to read their lines from a teleprompter.

Cameos by Hollywood actress Jennifer Tilly and Taiwanese veterans Chin Shih-jie (金士傑) and Tien Niu (恬妞) merely add confusion to the dramatically incoherent film. And rather than smooth over the narrative blips, the recurrent and punctuated musical leitmotifs are simply annoying.



## Sons and daughters are for fathers the twice-told tale

*Best known for directing Hoklo and Hakka films, Chang Tso-chi shot a movie mainly in Mandarin as a response to his late father's wishes*

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

*How Are You, Dad* (爸，你好嗎) is director Chang Tso-chi's (張作驥) response to his late father, a veteran soldier who fled to Taiwan with Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) troops, and before his death admonished his son to make a film he could understand. Five years after he passed away, Chang, whose films are usually in Hakka and Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), produced a compilation of 10 short stories in Mandarin about 10 different fathers and their relationships with their children.

The father figure, biological or symbolic, has always played an important part in Chang's works. The sons, sometimes suffering from an Oedipus complex, are often abandoned and separated from their fathers, who are typically alcoholics, gamblers or criminals. Some critics have

### Film Notes

#### HOW ARE YOU, DAD (爸，你好嗎)

**DIRECTED BY:** CHANG TSO-CHI (張作驥)

**STARRING:** JACK KAO (高捷), CHEN MU-YI (陳慕義), GAU MENG-JIE (高盟傑), LI CHUEN (李淳) AND CHANG CHIA-NIEN (張嘉年) AS THE FATHERS, CHANG JIE (張捷) AND FAN CHIH-WEI (范植偉) AS THE SONS, CHEN PEI-JUN (陳佩君) AND JI PEI-HUI (紀培慧) AS THE DAUGHTERS

**LANGUAGE:** IN MANDARIN, TAIWANESE, JAPANESE AND CANTONESE WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:** 107 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY



*How Are You, Dad* is made up of 10 short stories that examine the pleasure and pain of relationships between fathers and their children.

compared Chang's father-son relationships with Taiwan's relationships with Japan and China.

In *How Are You, Dad*, the father figures are more diverse, which allows viewers from different backgrounds to identify



and emphasize with the characters that include a tough gangster played by Jack Kao (高捷), who melts before his daughter after she is paralyzed in a diving accident; a young single dad played by Gau Meng-jie (高盟傑), who is lost, drunk

and sobs uncontrollably beside his infant son; and a Taiwanese businessman who is too busy to spend time with his kids but is willing to sacrifice his life for them.

Many of Chang's signature themes are revisited here. His

interest in identity is touched upon in the story of a half-Japanese, half-Taiwanese transvestite, and his enthusiasm for magical realism is realized through CGI zoo animals in the tale of a Hong Kong actor and his son who is severely brain damaged.

While many of the stories try too hard, Chang excels in capturing the subtle and nuanced emotions of everyday life. *Iron Gate* (鐵門) opens with a familiar scene: an extended Taiwanese family having dinner at the aged father's home. In three long takes, Chang masterfully conveys the in-laws' bickering and the loneliness of the old man, who sits by himself in his quiet house after his sons and daughters rush home.

In *The Sight of Father's Back* (背影), veteran actor Chen Mu-yi (陳慕義) plays a small-town worker who ferries his son to the train station on his rusty old truck after

working the night shift to pay for the child's school outing. The story paints an unforgettable image of a traditional father figure: reticent, reserved and awkward when it comes to showing his emotions and love for his offspring.

Another stand-out story is *The Old Time Dream* (昨日舊夢). Though nothing much takes place, the audience is quickly drawn into the witty conversation a father, son and grandson engage in at the dining table. The minutes-long dialogue is enough to paint a familial scene that tugs at the heartstrings: a widowed Mainlander living alone in Taipei whose son and three daughters have long since moved to Singapore and the US.

When he comes back to visit, the grown-up son looks amazedly at his father, feeling disturbed by the thought that he no longer knows the old man standing before him.

### OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

#### Up

Just ahead of a Pixar exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (more on this next week) comes the latest feature from this groundbreaking animation studio. Carl, a curmudgeonly old man whose life is full of disappointment, decides to tether his house to balloons and fly to South America, only to discover a youngster has come along for the ride. There they find an even older man, Muntz, and his aircraft whose adventures in another era inspired Carl to do what he does best. Voices include Ed Asner as Carl, Christopher Plummer as Muntz and Delroy Lindo. Critics ran out of superlatives for this movie, some calling it Pixar's finest — that's some compliment — which would make it one of the films of the year. Also screening in 3-D format in selected theaters — a version that Roger Ebert and *Variety's* Todd McCarthy among others have warned audiences against seeing because of the significant dimming that 3-D glasses cause.



#### Synecdoche, New York

Charlie Kaufman is a gift sent from Heaven for movie lovers burnt out by Hollywood mega-productions that are as stupid and cynical as they are expensive. This film is Kaufman's directorial debut after writing *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and other offbeat titles, and hopefully it will allow him to direct many more. Philip Seymour Hoffman is an ailing, miserable theater director whose latest project will be his defining work. And what a work it is: It lasts a lifetime, and as it develops the film morphs into something very strange, indeed. Critics were divided about this film's complexity and everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to thematic layering, but it remains a must-see because there's nothing out there like it. Oddly, the gargantuan stage that recreates a segment of New York and takes up most of the latter part of the film is not a million miles away from the idea that resulted in Muntz' aircraft in *Up*.



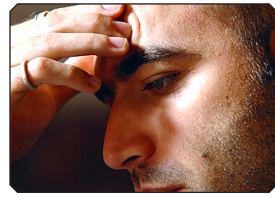
#### Management

An ambitious and able corporate saleswoman (Jennifer Aniston) stays in a nondescript motel in Kingman, Arizona, and is clumsily wooed by the owners' lovelorn son (Steve Zahn from *You've Got Mail* and *Sahara*). But something between them catches fire, and Zahn finds himself in some odd situations as he accompanies his new gal to the other side of America, among them meeting Aniston's former boyfriend, a yogurt tycoon (Woody Harrelson). Aniston's performance has attracted real praise, offering complexity and subtlety that a cookie-cutter romantic comedy wouldn't have time for.



#### Gomorrah

Top prize winner at Cannes last year, this is a stone-cold-sober depiction of the Comorra crime empire in Italy based on an extraordinary book about the organization by journalist Roberto Saviano, who is now under permanent police protection. The film concentrates on the lower end of the crime empire — mundane daily activities and the mechanics of violence — within a squalid community in Naples, whose youth fantasize about Tony Montana and other Hollywood gangster icons, but whose association with criminals delivers next to nothing of genuine value. The title is spelled as *Gomorra* in some territories.



#### Day of Disaster

Another made-for-German-TV production slinks its way into Taipei theaters with this loose recreation of a ghastly accident known as the Los Alfaques Disaster in Spain in the 1970s, in which a tanker crashed into a camping ground, exploded and immolated hundreds of people, killing more than 200. Now *this* is a popcorn flick. Made in 2007, the original title is *Tarragona: Ein Paradies in Flammen*.

