

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS



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Confucius 孔子: 決戰春秋

Casting Hong Kong's enduringly charismatic Chow Yun-fat (周潤發) as the most famous Chinese thinker of all was bound to divide Chinese-speaking audiences, though Beijing gave him and his colleagues a boost by kicking *Avatar* out of theaters to make room for them. In Taiwan, however, the market rules and the toothy one will have to stand on his own two feet. Purists might ask why a film about a philosopher would place so much emphasis on battle scenes worthy of a biopic of Sun Tzu (孫子); romantics will mourn the apparent excision of love scenes between Chow and Zhou Xun (周迅) to satisfy neo-neo-Confucianists in Beijing and elsewhere. Still, director Hu Mei (胡玫) seems to have delivered a respectful and respectable production that might attract a modern international audience to the timeless *Analects*.



14 Blades 錦衣衛

Donnie Yen (甄子丹) headlines in another actioner bound to increase his already considerable fan base. He plays the head of the titular Praetorian Guard-like bodyguard unit to the Chinese emperor. Lots of combat in this one, and its traditional settings are bound to impress those who love their fisticuffs and weapon-bearing on exotic-looking sets.



From Paris With Love

In recent years, for every *Old Dogs* John Travolta comes up with a movie like *From Paris With Love*. In this one he's a scary-looking CIA agent who takes no nonsense from his prey, or from his apprentice-of-sorts, a Paris-based diplomatic assistant (Jonathan Rhys Meyers, from *Bend It Like Beckham*) who has higher aspirations. Lots of the crew on this one worked on the Liam Neeson action feature *Taken*.



Phantom Pain

The title is more intriguing than the set-up: A terrible accident leaves a German cyclist permanently disabled — but also gives him the chance to show that he has true grit. You've heard this story before, but star Til Schweiger has a large number of admirers and, hey, everyone has to see an against-all-odds sporting redemption epic at some point. It's also based on a true story, which helps.

What tangled webs they weave

Niu Chen-zer's second feature views gangland violence in 1980s Wanhua through rose-tinted glasses

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Billed as an action-loaded gangster flick, *Doze Niu's* (鈕承澤) *Monga* (艋舺) stars some of Taiwan's brightest young things, including Ethan Ruan (阮經天) and Mark Chao (趙又廷).

With a stellar cast and entertaining storyline that weaves together action and drama, the film should do well with younger audience members who like to view the underworld through rose-tinted glasses.

Set in 1980s Bangka, otherwise known as Manka, an old Taipei borough that is now part of the city's Wanhua District (萬華), the movie opens with transfer student Mosquito (Chao) doing battle with school bullies. The following day, a high school gang comprised of Hoklo-speakers approaches Mosquito and recruits him.

Zhilong (Rhydyan Vaughan), whose father Geta (Ma Ru-long) is a well-respected underworld kingpin, leads the gang of five. Fellow gang member Monk (Ruan), however, is the most ruthless. Together they skip class and spend their days getting into street fights, going clubbing and wooing girls.

With their carefree innocence, the gang members seem invincible, until one night a spot of street justice accidentally leads to murder.

Meanwhile, a gang of Mainlanders from another area attempts to muscle in on the action in Bangka by befriending Wenqian (Jason Wang, 王識賢) a member of a rival gang. The outsiders conspire to take out Bangka's gang bosses, including Zhilong's father, and approach Monk to undertake the slayings, who obliges.

Mosquito uncovers Monk's betrayal, and the scene is set for a bloody showdown.

Niu said he wanted to craft a uniquely Taiwanese gangster flick. Visually, the director has achieved his goal as the characters in the film look like archetypal *taike* (台客) with their floral print shirts, bell-bottoms and flip-flops.

The movie's romanticism is



Film Notes

MONGA

艋舺

DIRECTED BY:
DOZE NIU (鈕承澤)

STARRING:
ETHAN RUAN (阮經天) AS MONK,
MARK CHAO (趙又廷) AS MOSQUITO,
RHYDIAN VAUGHAN (鳳小岳) AS
ZHILONG, MA RU-LONG (馬如龍)
AS GETA, KE JIA-YAN (柯佳嬿) AS
XIAONING, JASON WANG (王識賢)
AS WENQIAN

RUNNING TIME:
140 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN
AND TAIWANESE WITH CHINESE
SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

palpable — it is more a paean to times gone than a pure gangster flick. Friendship, the innocence of youth and loyalty take precedence over scheming and plotting, and the violence is rendered lyrically rather than realistically. The opening street fight, which involves more than 100 extras, is played out like a ballet set against the score composed by Sandee Chen (陳珊妮).

Unlike Niu's semi-autobiographical feature debut *What On Earth Have I Done Wrong?* (情非得已之生存之道), *Monga's* scale and structure require storytelling skills that the director has yet to master. The narrative is uneven and frequently plagued with dull dialogue. Tensions mostly dissolve as the characters' conflicting emotions come across as more constructed than heartfelt.

One exception is Monk, who is secretly in love with Zhilong, played by British-Taiwanese actor Vaughan. Niu injects his role with layers of emotion that elicit sympathy for a man torn between love and revenge.

FILM REVIEW

'Confucius' struggles against 'Avatar'

On the eve of its release in Taiwan, the going looks tough for 'Confucius,' a movie panned as wooden and preachy

AFP AND NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Nearly two weeks after US blockbuster *Avatar* was ordered out of some theaters to make way for homegrown epic *Confucius* (孔子), the Chinese film is not getting a warm welcome.

The movie about the ancient philosopher's life starring Hong Kong actor Chow Yun-fat (周潤發) has been savaged by critics and reports suggest box office sales have been sluggish.

The film is being panned as a wooden and preachy biography that sells out by forcing in battle scenes and even a romantic love interest for the revered thinker.

On the popular movie site Mtime.com, it scored a 3.8 out of 10 in user-submitted reviews, compared to 9.4 for *Avatar*. The *Global Times* gave it a 4 out of 10, calling it "thoughtless and mind-numbing."

Han Han (韓寒), one of China's most popular writers who is widely viewed as a key voice of

the country's youth generation, gave it a two on his popular blog, calling it an entertainment, educational, and business failure.

"It is a film that could be completely done without," he wrote.

In its first three weeks in China, *Avatar* topped US\$100 million in revenue to become China's all-time top-grossing film, or about US\$4.7 million a day. *Confucius* averaged just US\$1.8 million a day in its first three days, Xinhua reported. State film agencies refused to provide figures.

The previous box-office champ — the disaster epic *2012* — grossed nearly US\$70 million dollars late last year, state media has said.

Reports that the 2D version of *Avatar* was to be pulled late last month sparked accusations the government wanted it pushed aside for *Confucius*, whose teachings on harmony and respect for authority enjoy official favor under the ruling Communist Party after decades of being suppressed as "feudal."

The 3D version of *Avatar* is expected to continue showing through this month as planned, state press reports have said.

On Wednesday, *Confucius'* producer denied that US blockbuster *Avatar* was ordered out of some theaters to make way for the homegrown film.

John Shum, head of the film



company that produced *Confucius*, denied that *Avatar* was pulled for his film about social harmony and respect for authority — themes that enjoy official favor in China.

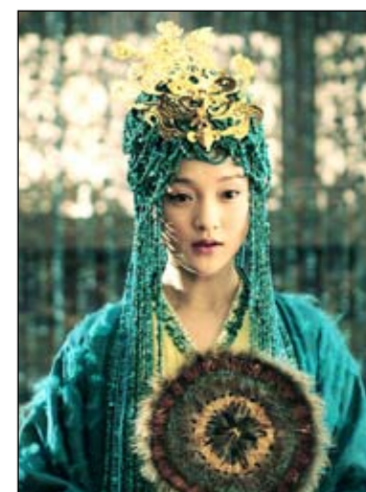
"This is not the fact. We shouldn't complicate the matter. A movie is a movie and we are simply shooting a touching story about Confucius," he told reporters in Taipei.

"If China wants to politicize things that's their business ... It has nothing to do with us," he said. "But I hope they didn't do it because it would not help, but hurt *Confucius* instead."

Meanwhile, theaters in Beijing and across China continue to show the 2D version of *Avatar*, according to theaters and movie

listing Web sites.

Some Chinese have speculated authorities were nervous about the portrayal in *Avatar* of a tribe resisting humans chasing them from their land on a far-off planet, saying it too closely evoked a wave of unrest in China linked to land disputes that has made authorities nervous.



Above: Chinese actress Zhou Xun plays the role of Nan Zi in the movie *Confucius*. Left: Hong Kong actor Chow Yun-fat plays the role of the title character in *Confucius*. The film was developed in part with the Chinese government, and is part of an initiative to promote the philosophy of Confucius.

PHOTOS: EPA

China allows only 20 foreign films to be shown in its theaters each year splitting revenue among producers, theaters and local distributors, which the US has criticized as unfairly protecting domestic films.

Part of the problem could be that although it is building theaters rapidly, China still has only a fraction of the number in

the US. Moreover, perhaps one-third of its estimated 4,700 cinema screens are too antiquated to show foreign films, according to one industry worker.

Those few foreign films compete with a growing number of domestic films — more than 400 in 2008, including those co-produced with foreign companies. Overall, box-office revenue is soaring.

But China's main studios are all state-owned and some producers complain that the government cannot decide whether movies should serve as market-driven entertainment or nationalistic propaganda.

Critics say *Confucius* belongs in the latter category. The movie, produced by Beijing Dadi Century Ltd, focuses on the later life of the philosopher, whose teachings are garnering renewed interest in China. The cast was billed as star-studded. It opened on 2,500 screens in China, a record number.

Chow, who plays Confucius, predicted it would challenge the box-office success of *Avatar*, produced by 20th Century Fox. But 13,039 Internet users gave *Confucius* ratings that averaged 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 10 on douban.com, a popular Chinese entertainment Web site. About 95,280 users gave *Avatar* a rating that averaged 9.1.