

# The rest is history

Second-generation Taiwanese American Will Tiao produced 'Formosa Betrayed,' the first American film to deal with US-Taiwan relations and explore the issues of democracy, identity and justice during the White Terror period

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PHOTO COURTESY OF FORMOSA FILMS

A little over two weeks ago, just before Taiwan's 228 holiday, a new film about the country's Martial Law era opened in movie theaters in New York, Los Angeles, Boston and San Francisco, with dozens more openings planned across the US in coming weeks. A political thriller, *Formosa Betrayed* may be a story told in the language of Hollywood, but it is also a unique showing of strength by North America's Taiwanese communities. Around three-quarters of the film's US\$8 million budget came from Taiwanese investors and groups, and despite mixed reviews, overseas Taiwanese have so far composed the film's core audience.

*Formosa Betrayed* is a fictionalized account of a Taiwanese American professor and government critic who is murdered in Chicago in 1983 and the FBI agent — played by former *Dawson's Creek* star James Van Der Beek — who traces the killers' trail into the heart of Taiwan's government. The plot is loosely modeled on actual cases of that era, most closely mirroring those of Chen Wen-chen (陳文成) and Henry Liu (劉宜良), exiled government critics believed to have been assassinated in 1981 and 1984, respectively.

The entire project is the brainchild of Will Tiao (刁謙能), a second-generation Taiwanese American actor who co-wrote and produced the film. Born in Kansas, Tiao, 36, started his career in politics, working as an intern for one of Washington's biggest pro-Taiwan lobbying groups, the Formosan Association of Public Affairs (FAPA). In 2002, he switched tracks and moved to Hollywood, but he never lost sight of his desire to push Taiwan's case for diplomatic recognition and independence. In a phone interview yesterday, the *Taipei Times* found him effusive and passionate about Taiwan-related issues, and also quite excited about his new film.

**Taipei Times: Where did the idea for this film come from?**

**Will Tiao:** My parents are originally from Kaohsiung. When I was growing up, they always told my sister and I to call ourselves "Taiwanese" and not "Chinese." Back then, of course, that was a controversial statement. My parents had joined the Taiwanese student association at the university they attended, Kansas State University. They were put on a blacklist and couldn't go back to Taiwan, and when they could, they were followed and harassed. When we grew up, we were told to be very careful about whom we talked to about these things. I think that's what led to my interest in politics, and it definitely led to my first internship, which was with FAPA.

I had always had in my head that this would be a great story to tell, because it definitely had never been told to a wider American audience. Having worked in politics in DC, when I went into entertainment, well, they always say, "write what you know." Well, this is what I knew.

**TT: How did you make the transition from politics in Washington, DC, to Hollywood?**

**WT:** I basically worked on and off in DC for about 10 years, and eventually got a position under president Clinton in the Labor Department as a presidential management intern. While I was in DC, I started acting, just

as a hobby. First it was a class, and then I was in a play, and then an agent saw me, and they put me in a commercial, and then I was in a TV show, then a film, and it just took off.

**TT: The story of *Formosa Betrayed* seems largely based on the murder of Henry Liu, the writer who was killed in 1984 in his California home by Taiwanese gangsters, one of whom later testified that the assassination orders came from Taiwan's government.**

**WT:** Definitely he's one of our inspirations, but there are a number of stories from 1979 to 1985 that we culled from. We picked 1983 [as a year for the story] really as a midpoint. Every character is basically a composite of several real people, and every event is inspired by real events. Obviously it's fictional, but it goes on to a number of major historical events that happened during that period.

**TT: Why did you decide to make this a fictionalization instead of choosing one key event and going into that specific history?**

**WT:** I'm not a documentary, and I wasn't really interested in making a documentary. I've always done features or shorts or fictional work. I was trended towards movies that were political, historical thrillers and did similar things — movies like *Munich*, *The Killing Fields*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *The Last King of Scotland* and *Hotel Rwanda*. All of those were inspired by actual events but were fictionalized as well. It also seemed to me that it would attract more attention than a documentary, and already it has.

**TT: But the film seems to bring together different aspects of the Martial Law era, perhaps conflating the heavy, highly visible military presence of the 1950s and 1960s with the killings of the liberalizing 1980s. Are you worried that this could undermine the importance of the message?**

**WT:** Not particularly, because like I said, I wasn't trying to make a documentary. Films like these political thrillers I mentioned, particularly in the 70s, they all did the exact same thing. Our goal is — we want people who don't know one thing about Taiwan, China or US foreign policy to go into this and enjoy it and get a sense of what it was like back then. I realize that the more specifically you know Taiwanese history, you'll obviously know more about what we culled from. It's meant to be that way. It's meant to be enjoyed on different levels. But if you're looking for a documentary, this is not the film for you.

**TT: Who is the audience for this film?**

**WT:** There are really three primary audiences that come to see this film. The first group would be what I call second-generation Taiwanese Americans, people like myself. Taiwanese American students across the country have really banded around this film in a way I haven't really seen before. It's been really amazing to watch this second generation, which frankly has really not been that active in these issues and in dealing with Taiwan and its identity and democracy and independence.

And of course there's their parents. Overwhelmingly, the response from that crowd is a lot of gratefulness that their story is being

told. At the *San Jose Mercury-News*, one of the reporters who was interviewing my investors and other first-generation immigrants who'd seen the film said, "I feel like it's a healing experience for them." I think that's right, because for so long, they've never really been able to talk about it.

Then of course, there's the third audience, which is the audience that we've primarily aimed the film at, the mass American audience. We've been advertising on politically oriented Web sites, like CNN.com, the Drudge Report, the Huffington Post — what we call the NPR crowd. And we're getting those people into the theaters, interestingly enough. For a lot of them, this is not history that they ever knew. Or if they did know it, they were taught that Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) came over to Taiwan and brought democracy and Free China with him and that he was a good guy and the US supported him. They don't really know the hidden history of the native Taiwanese people and their struggle against Chiang Kai-shek and his troops.

**TT: In addition to the ugly history of Taiwan's "White Terror," the film makes a concerted effort to present Taiwan's current international dilemma, mentioning Chinese missiles and threats. Have people reacted to that?**

**WT:** There is some of that, but from the American perspective, there are a lot of questions about America's role in this. And to me, that's what the film really focuses on.

**TT: Wendy Crewson's character seems really critical there. She plays a top-level US diplomat who backs the KMT government while knowing of their political crimes.**

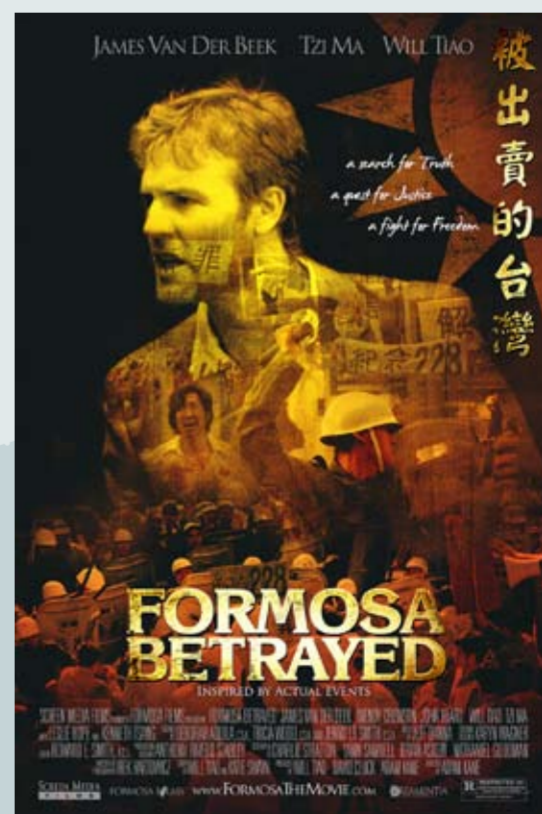
**WT:** That's a character I know very well, because I used to have to work with people like her from the State Department on Taiwan issues. That's a character that exists today. The United States has this policy of "strategic ambiguity" when it comes to Taiwan, and she symbolizes, I would say, current and past American policy towards Taiwan.

**TT: This is an indie film financed largely by overseas Taiwanese groups, so why is it so often referred to as a "Hollywood" film?**

**WT:** There are two types of films in Hollywood. There are the studio films, and everything else is considered independent. When it's being referred to as a Hollywood film, people are referring to the fact that the people making the film are old Hollywood hands. Let me give you an example. Adam Kane, the director, a cinematographer of over 20 years who shot the pilot of [the TV show] *Heroes*.

But I knew that if I could raise enough money, it could look like a big-budget film, and that's what I did. I used my old contacts at FAPA. I started going around to Taiwanese Americans, to Taiwanese Canadians, I came to Taiwan. This has been by definition a grass-roots project. There have been hundreds and hundreds of fund-raisers, and I've talked to tens of thousands of people, and I have a few hundred investors.

**TT: It must be a great feeling, to get that kind of support.**



Will Tiao, left, and James Van Der Beek in *Formosa Betrayed*.

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**WT:** My director always tells people that in 20-plus years in Hollywood, he's never seen anything like this. Where basically you raise the money without a script, without a cast, without any of the typical things you need to do to raise money in Hollywood. So people are coming to us now and asking us to produce their films. So we'll see where this all goes. It's a very exciting time.

*Formosa Betrayed* will likely make its way to Taiwanese theaters later this year.