

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW



Don't judge a book by its movie

The complexities of history take a back seat to message and formulaic filmmaking in 'Formosa Betrayed,' which takes its title from the memoir of a US diplomat stationed in Taiwan during the 228 Incident

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

It is probably appropriate to applaud the fact that *Formosa Betrayed* has been given a Taiwan release, but virtually everything else about the film can only make one shake one's head. Causes for despair range from accusations of political pressure brought to bear on the production of the film, already given coverage recently in the *Taipei Times* (see stories on Page 3 of this newspaper's July 31 and Aug. 2 editions), to the lamentable quality of the adaptation and filmmaking.

It is only fair to say that many, though far from all, of the problems in *Formosa Betrayed* can be attributed to the fact that it had to be shot in Thailand rather than Taiwan because of budget constraints that purportedly were the result of political pressure brought to bear by several members of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), which is unsympathetically represented in the film.

Formosa Betrayed is loosely inspired by the book of the same title published in 1965 by George H. Kerr, a US Foreign Service staff officer in Taipei at the time of the 228 Incident in 1947. The book is a mixture of history and memoir that examines the events around the retrocession of Taiwan to Chinese rule and America's not altogether honorable role in the process. The betrayal of the title refers not just to the dashing of hopes raised by the prospect of Taiwan being returned from Japanese colonial rule to administration by a Chinese government, but also the support given to a dictatorial regime by Washington, which ignored the democratic aspirations of the Taiwanese people for its own geopolitical interests. This provides background in the same way as Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone* provides background for the Paul Greengrass action thriller *Green Zone*. In other words, it uses the book as little more than a bit of topical color.

Formosa Betrayed tells the story



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of Special Agent Kelly (James Van Der Beek), a junior officer with the FBI who gets sent to Taiwan to observe an investigation into the murder of Henry Wen, an outspoken critic of the KMT government who was assassinated while in exile in the US. Kelly quickly realizes that attempts to smear Wen as a triad member caught up in a gangland dispute are merely cover for a wide-ranging campaign of political terror by the KMT to silence anti-government elements. He decides to take things into his own hands, bucking the reigns that both his hosts and his superiors in the US try to put on him in order to bring the truth to light. He finds an ally in Ming (Will Tiao), who wants to get Taiwan's message out to the world, and pays a terrible price.

Unfortunately, director Adam Kane is no Greengrass, and James Van Der Beek is no Matt Damon as an action hero, and the result is a plodding attempt at a political thriller that spends too much time on expository dialogue and fails to deliver any thrills. In addition to being shot in Thailand, the film uses no Taiwanese actors in any major role (Will

Tiao is Taiwanese American and was born and raised in Kansas). This gives the film an utterly ersatz feel from the get-go, for the setting is manifestly not Taipei (and could not mistaken for it by anyone familiar with Taiwan even given the time lapse of 50 years). The facade is further compromised by the use of Chinese dialogue, as when Hong Kong-born US-based actor Tzi Ma, playing the role of a senior government official, gives a formal welcome speech at an official banquet for the newly arrived American agent in Mandarin so stilted that it would not be out of place in a speech contest for beginner students at National Taiwan Normal University's Mandarin Training Center. The rest of the Chinese dialogue is of a piece with this. Although setting and sound might be secondary to the importance of getting a political message out to a wider audience, the poor quality of both seriously undermines the credibility of the film.

As for the political message, even that ends up getting hopelessly garbled, and director Kane gets caught up in the lockstep of the Hollywood mainstream

Film Notes

FORMOSA BETRAYED

DIRECTED BY:
ADAM KANE

STARRING:
JAMES VAN DER BEEK (JAKE KELLY),
WENDY CREWSON (SUSAN KANE),
WILL TIAO (MING), JOHN HEARD
(TOM BRAXTON), TZI MA (KUO),
THIENCHAI JAYASVASTI JR (CAPTAIN
CHEN), KENNETH TSANG (GENERAL
TSE), ADAM WANG (LEE), MINTITA
WATTANAKUL (MAYSING)

RUNNING TIME:
103 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

thriller format. The complex ethnic and political issues surrounding Retrocession get reduced to a generic conflict of good, ordinary people turning against a corrupt and despotic power, and the lone man of conscience appalled by the self-interest of the government he serves. There is nothing here that stands out, either in the story or in the characters involved. The indifferent acting and flaccid dialogue don't help.

The sad fact is that to get an idea about what was happening in Taiwan around Retrocession and the 228 Incident, there is still no rival for Hou Hsiao-hsien's (侯孝賢) *A City of Sadness* (悲情城市), which was made way back in 1989. The best that can be said of *Formosa Betrayed* is that it might direct a few people to read the book, which is available online at www.romanization.com/books/formosabetrayed. Save your money and go online.

This Movie Is Broken

Concert movie that should be a great follow-up for those who made the Broken Social Scene gig here last weekend, and for those who missed it, an introduction to the band. The film by Canadian director Bruce McDonald weaves an easygoing story of a tentative relationship between Bruno (Greg Calderone) and Caroline (Georgina Reilly), who wake up together one morning and need to work out how to go on from there. Much of the action takes the two may-be lovers through the backstage setup of a Broken Social Scene performance. Intimate camera work is effectively cut with excellent concert footage, creating a movie that has proven a big hit with fans.



Ice Kacang Puppy Love (初戀紅豆冰)

This Chinese-language film from Malaysia is a bittersweet coming-of-age comedy that is full of nostalgia for traditional Asian family life. Directed by and starring Ah Niu (aka Tan Kheng-seong 陳慶祥, as Botak) and Angelica Lee (李心潔, as Fighting Fish) as cousins who have a close friendship verging on the romantic. Their relationship is complicated by an annoying neighbor, Malinfan (Gary Chaw, 曹格), who falls hard for the combative Fighting Fish. Romantic attachments in *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* are an extension of the sound track's songs, which are slightly melancholic and very melodic. The mixture of pop star faces and nostalgic mood will be easily recognizable to Taiwanese. *Ice kacang* is the Malaysian term for the shaved ice dessert that is popular here. The theme music for the film is already working its way up the charts.



The Extraordinary Adventures of Adele Blanc-Sec

Any work by Luc Besson is likely to be visually stunning, and in his most recent guise of director, he has bundled together visual ideas into something that resembles a post-*Avatar* meeting of Mary Poppins and Laura Croft.

There are flying dinosaurs and Egyptian mummies, as well as Louise Bourgoin dressed in 1920s flapper kit. The title character, Adele Blanc-Sec, is a free-spirited woman who throws herself into a world of adventure that involves many delightfully improbable scenarios rendered with all Besson's usual attention to detail. Based on a comic book series by Jacques Tardi, Besson has predictably given the satirical and complex original material his usual stylistic polish (which for many translates as a complete lack of depth). This is a fantasy that is aimed as much toward adults as children.



Bunny and the Bull

A clever film that fails to be funny, Paul King's (creator of the popular surreal/absurd comedy television series *The Mighty Boosh*) *Bunny and the Bull* is a visual feast that fails to work on many levels. Impressive production work that corrals a wide range of animation techniques into a fantasy road trip reminiscent of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *The Science of Sleep* alienates audiences with its heavy-handed technical smarts. Leads Edward Hogg (Stephan) and Simon Farnaby (Bunny) provide a deadpan response to this fantasy work that should be funny, but they are let down by a script that is short of laughs.



Love You 10,000 Years (愛你一萬年)

Romantic comedies that depend primarily on a highly improbable premise for their laughs are nothing unusual, but *Love You 10,000 Years* manages to underwhelm even before it is out of the gate. Its lack of credibility is heightened by publicity material that lauds the support of the Taichung City Government and the presence of numerous scenic locations. Films that factor in government promotions are rarely a success. Then we have Vic Chou (周渝民), who has chosen this unpromising vehicle to save his floundering career. The story is about a slacker guitarist, played by Chou, who meets a Japanese woman on the rebound from a nasty breakup. They decide to embark on a love affair that will last just 100 days. The results are pretty predictable.



Axis Powers Paint It, White

Alien invasion movie from Japan based on a Web comic titled *Hetalia: Axis Powers* that was adapted into manga and anime formats. Originally set during the period between the two World Wars, it has now moved to outer space. The film, directed by Bob Shirohata, who oversaw the concept's migration to anime, continues the basic idea of satirizing world events through various national stereotypes.



Liar Game: The Final Stage

Yet more manga-based movie action, *Liar Game: The Final Stage* provides a resolution to a franchise that was first serialized in 2005. This film is partly set on the island of Kinmen (金門), which should provide additional interest for local viewers. The plot focuses on Nao Kanzaki (Erika Toda), an almost pathologically honest college student who gets caught up in an ongoing scam involving "genius swindler" Shinichi Akiyama. The story follows a progression that is similar to that of a computer game, as characters advance from one level to the next. For manga fans only.

