

Ip Man is back ... and more or less the same

The fictionalized life story of kung fu master Ip Man continues in Hong Kong under British colonial rule

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



Since its release last year, the immensely successful *Ip Man* (葉問) has elevated its eponymous grandmaster of the *wing chun* (詠春) martial arts school to an icon of Chinese kung fu and propelled action star Donnie Yen (甄子丹) to superstardom.

The highly anticipated sequel, *Ip Man 2* (葉問2), closely follows the format that made its predecessor a blockbuster hit. But this time the Chinese hero-versus-foreign invaders narrative is fleshed out without wire fu or CGI-enhanced martial arts moves.

Yen is joined by action director Sammo Hung (洪金寶), who plays a supporting but important role in the follow-up that won't disappoint fans, though it doesn't offer many surprises.

The story begins with Ip Man (Yen) fleeing to Hong Kong having defeated the Japanese general in Foshan. To support his family, Ip Man sets up a *wing chun* academy. But as a newcomer to the British colony, the unassuming kung fu master soon catches the attention of master Hung of the powerful Hung Ga school. Respected by various martial arts schools, Hung insists that, in order to earn his right to teach *wing chun* in Hong Kong, Ip Man must win duels

against local masters.

The challenge leads to a masterfully choreographed fight between Ip Man and Hung that dazzles with its sheer intensity and virtuosity, a scene that deserves to be considered one of the most memorable fighting sequences in kung fu cinema.

The duel ends in a draw, and despite the combatants' differences, the two come to respect each other's skills and integrity.

As with the first installment, the second half of the film follows the martial arts hero rising up against foreign oppressors. Only this time, it is not the villainous Japanese our Chinese hero does battle with, but an evil white man in the form of boxing champion Twister (Darren Shahlavi), who brutally beats master Hung to death in what was supposed to be a friendly match.

Outraged, Ip Man challenges the vicious pugilist to a final battle in front of a cheering crowd.

Veteran martial arts star Hung once again creates the adrenaline-pumping, close-range combat sequences that show Yen fighting his way through a fish market melee, tabletop duel and ringside battle.

Director Wilson Yip (葉偉信) and scriptwriter Edmond Wong (黃子桓)

neatly tie these action sequences closely to the plot.

One thing that this old-school kung fu fare has gone too far with, however, is its overly caricatured portrait of

foreign

villains.

Though in the first *Ip Man* movie, the Japanese general, played by Hiroyuki Ikeuchi, seems to have a shred of humanity left within him, the white men in the follow-up are comically wicked and corrupt, prompting the contemporary viewer to wonder why the villains are still as embarrassingly witless and one-dimensional as they were in Bruce Lee's (李小龍) heyday.

Despite its plot holes, the *Ip Man* series has potential and recalls the 1990s' *Once Upon a Time in China* (黃飛鴻) franchise starring Jet Li (李連杰). The brief appearance toward the end of the film of a young Bruce Lee, Ip Man's famous disciple, hints at the possibility of another sequel, though Yen has reportedly said he won't be in another *Ip Man* movie.

What is certain is that competing *Ip Man* projects will soon hit the silver screen, including Wong Kar-wai's (王家衛) *The Grand Master* (一代宗師), currently in development, and Herman Yau's (邱禮濤) prequel *The Legend is Born — Ip Man* (葉問前傳), slated for commercial release in July.

Film Notes

IP MAN 2 (葉問2)

DIRECTED BY:
WILSON YIP (葉偉信)

STARRING:
DONNIE YEN (甄子丹) AS IP MAN,
SAMMO HUNG (洪金寶) AS HUNG
CHUN-NAM, HUANG XIAOMING (黃曉明)
AS WONG LEUNG, LYNN DAILIN
XIONG (熊黛林) AS ZHANG YONG
CHENG

RUNNING TIME:
104 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN CANTONESE AND ENGLISH WITH
ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

FILM REVIEW

'Iron Man 2' brings out the big guns

Everything original about 'Iron Man' has been replaced in the sequel by noise, multiple villains and confused story lines

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Iron Man generated a good deal of support from lovers of superhero movies when it came out in 2008 because it has some claim to originality and to have suited the unusual (and often annoying) acting talent of Robert Downey Jr. It is therefore not surprising that *Iron Man 2* is now upon us.

The sequel shows all the worst symptoms of terminal sequelitis, making up for an absence of ideas with bigger guns, more exotic locations, deeper cleavages, and faster jump cuts. And did I mention bigger guns, many, many more of them.

The story picks up with Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), now publicly acknowledged as Ironman, enforcing world peace through the use of his amazing metal suit. Everyone wants a piece of this technology, but Stark is not willing to share. He knows only too well what might become of this technology if it gets into the wrong hands; and this includes those of the US military.

The role of world savior weighs heavily on Stark, but he still wants to party. The US military and business rival Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) want to take things into their own hands. Then there is Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), a Russian physicist who wants revenge on Stark, believing that Stark's father stole ideas from Vanko's Russian emigre father before having him deported back to the gulag. There is potential in this conceit, as there is

in the privatization of international peacekeeping, but Favreau is too busy coloring in the boxes in a painting-by-numbers action film to fill in these finer details.

Worried that his treatment of these ideas produces a hollow sound, Favreau seems to feel pressed to add plot line over plot line, seemingly in the hope that in the ensuing tangle, the audience will forget that nothing about this movie makes any kind of sense. The introduction of Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury and the whole SHIELD sup-plot, though part of the Marvel Comics universe, to the uninitiated managed to seem like an afterthought, so poorly was it integrated into the story.

Tony Stark is also facing his own demise as the power source for Ironman gradually poisons his blood. Genius that he is, he works out how to save himself and the *Ironman* franchise, synthesizing a new element with the help of some air-conditioner ducts and a laser pointer. He succeeds in doing this only seconds after his supercomputer tells him that the task is impossible. Even in the make-believe world of superheroes, where there are no limits and everything is possible, the story loses its purpose and the characters any claim on our sympathies.

Sam Rockwell's Justin Hammer is one of the few bright spots, producing a comic villain who counter-balances the self-conscious flippancy that passes for humor with Downey. Gwyneth Paltrow as the demurely dressed Pepper Potts is



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UP



not sufficient crumpet for the lads who are the film's main target, so Scarlett Johansson has been brought in to show a bit of stocking. In her dual role of Natalie Rushman/Natasha Romanoff, she is in the film to flaunt her curves and dash about in a black bodysuit. Johansson proves

herself an utterly inept action star, while Rourke's all-too-brief return to form in the indie flick *The Wrestler* is revealed to have been a flash in the pan. As the villain-in-chief, he provides lots of grimacing, but no real sense of menace.

Sure, there's no need to take

superhero movies too seriously, but there is silly entertainment that takes pleasure in pleasing its audience and there is cynical, money-grabbing filmmaking that sees nothing but the box-office take. *Ironman 2* falls firmly into the latter category.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Mademoiselle Chambon

Low-key French drama about a blue-collar dad who falls for his son's teacher, a woman of high culture who nevertheless finds herself becoming a victim of her own desires.



Scriptwriter and director Stephane Brize picked up a Cesar Award last year for best film adaptation of this work from a novel by Eric Holder, and he keeps the whole thing very buttoned down. The power of the film derives from the turmoil that is taking place beneath the surface and the terrible consequences for the very respectable main characters if it breaks loose. The level of restraint has the critics polarized. Despite generally acknowledged fine performances by leads Sandrine Kiberlain and Vincent Lindon, *Mademoiselle Chambon* might be just a tad too respectful and bloodless to attain widespread appeal.

Rec 2

Aliens meets *The Exorcist* meets *Cloverfield* in Spanish. This is a sequel to the highly regarded *Rec*, a classic of hand-held camera point-of-view filmmaking. In the original the camera in question was that of a television crew. In *Rec 2* it is cameras mounted on the helmets of an elite armed response team sent into the same abandoned city block to find out what happened to the original media expedition. A clue is provided by the presence of a Catholic priest in mufti who is on hand to face down evil with the power of the divine. Things don't go as planned and there is plenty of killing and blurry scares to keep the audience jumping, but critics agree the sequel lacks the immediacy and raw power of the original.



Twinkle, Twinkle Little Stars (一闪一闪亮晶晶)

Documentary-style feature by Lin Cheng-sheng (林正盛) who has pretty much been going down hill since his big success with *Betelnut Beauty* (愛你愛我, 2001). Opting for a new format might be a way of finding his way back on track, though his choice of a worthy but already somewhat shopworn topic of Asperger syndrome suggests he still has a passion for the sort of social earnestness that sunk *Crusoe's Robinson* (魯賓遜漂流記, 2002) and fatally marred *The Moon Also Rises* (月光下·我記得, 2005). The film focuses on four children who suffer from this often debilitating condition and explores their unique vision of the world through projects such as turning their drawings into film animations. Unfortunately, good intentions don't always make the best films.

