

Raising the red lantern over Taroko

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Earlier this month, Hualien County Commissioner Fu Kun-chi (傅錫祺) said he had extended an invitation to Chinese film director Zhang Yimou (張藝謀) to produce an outdoor show at Taroko Gorge.

The news drew little attention, and it has yet to be announced whether Zhang, whose production company has created the Impression series of shows in West Lake, Lijiang and Guilin, has accepted the invitation, though his company has reportedly dispatched a team to assess the feasibility of the project. Still, the invitation itself is troublesome, showing local officials' willingness to turn to China for talent when there is plenty of it right here in Taiwan. It is simply inconceivable that no one in the Taiwanese artistic community would be capable of orchestrating an outdoor show in Taroko. Neither Kaohsiung nor Taipei found it necessary to go abroad to find people to put together the opening and closing ceremonies of last year's World Games and Deaflympics.

Also problematic is the fact that over the years, Zhang has been employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to beautify its propaganda efforts, turning him into a modern-day Joseph Goebbels. Aside from the Impression series and the opening and closing ceremonies for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Zhang also organized last year's Oct. 1 National Day parade celebrating the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, a show that was marked by military displays — mostly targeted at Taiwan — worthy of a fascist state at the height of its power.

That an artist who played a role in this display of aggression would be invited by its principal target to put together a show at one of the nation's premier tourist spots is a sick irony, to put it mildly, not to mention that he would be paid with taxpayer money.

Fu, whose yen for unprincipled machinations is by now legendary, argues that if Zhang agreed to produce the show, it could help draw Chinese and international tourists to Taroko. If Fu had any appreciation for nature's grandeur, he would know that Taroko, with its unique 19km marble canyon and towering cliffs, does not need to be accessorized to attract tourists. Better publicity campaigns abroad and making the area more accessible is what is required, not cheap eye candy exploiting the box office successes of a foreign moviemaker.

His claim that more Chinese tourists would visit Taroko if Zhang were to produce a show there, meanwhile, goes against everything we've been told so far about Chinese tourists — that they are curious about Taiwan and seek to learn more about it. If what attracts them is a show by Zhang, then why bother coming to Taiwan when his work is readily accessible in China?

When we look at this development as part of a larger campaign to Sinicize Taiwan launched by President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) administration, however, the move makes perfect sense. By dint of awarding contracts to Chinese artists for productions in Taiwan, not only could all local essence and flavor be elbowed out, but for people abroad, the contrasts between Taiwanese

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and Chinese culture would become so narrow as to become virtually insignificant. Of course, this is what the Government Information Office did for decades under the previous authoritarian Chinese Nationalist government — marketing Taiwan as a place of true Chinese culture and traditions.

Zhang undeniably has talent, and his production of the ceremonies at the Beijing Games was indeed grandiose. (Of course, Zhang also bragged that China was the only country besides North Korea where he could have produced such spectacles because labor unions and laws would have prevented him rehearsing his performers for hours at a stretch.)

We don't need someone who has struck a Faustian deal with a repressive regime to propel his career to do what we can do at home.

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