

## A Taiwan blockbuster: Blood-stained rainbow

Written by The Economist

Thursday, 22 September 2011 09:19

---

A FILM that depicts Taiwan's half-century of Japanese colonial rule from the point of view of a fierce tribe of indigenous headhunters is generating a surge of national pride on the island. "Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale" was surrounded by buzz at this year's Venice Film Festival. But that was nothing compared with its reception in Taiwan since opening on September 9th.

Made by an acclaimed Taiwanese director, Wei Te-sheng, with John Woo, a Hollywood force, as producer, the film has already broken records. At a cost of \$25m, it is the most expensive Taiwanese film ever made. The opening-day takings of NT\$23m (\$790,000), for the first of what will be two instalments, were the highest ever for a Taiwanese film. More box-office records are bound to follow.

Quite probably "Warriors of the Rainbow" also has the highest number of graphic beheadings of any film anywhere. But they are faithful historical depictions. In 1930 hundreds of Taiwan's Seediq people living in the central uplands, oppressed and exploited by the Japanese and believing their culture was being destroyed, revolted against their overlords with scant hope of success. They first attacked a school athletics gathering, slaughtering over 100 Japanese, and then raided police outposts. The uprising, known as the Wushe incident, triggered a brutal Japanese response, including poison gas dropped from aircraft. The rebellion's leader, Mouna Rudao, is still seen as a folk hero by many Taiwanese.

The film emphasises the Seediq belief that only warriors with hands bloodied by slaughter can qualify for the afterlife (reached across a rainbow bridge). Its violence is disturbing in the extreme. One aboriginal boy in his early teens leads children to knife both their Japanese teacher and cowering women. (Later in the Wushe incident, though not depicted in this instalment, Japanese-led punitive forces indulge in a beheading orgy of their own.)

"Warriors of the Rainbow" is the first mainstream Taiwanese film to focus on Taiwan's aboriginals. Numbering about 500,000 out of a population of 23m, Taiwan's aborigines are descendants of Austronesians who first came to the island as long as 12,000 years ago. Han Chinese immigration started in earnest in the 17th century, beginning the long marginalisation of indigenous groups. Not all aboriginal groups saw the Japanese as their chief oppressors. Many sided with them against the Seediq, and many more fought for the Japanese in South-East Asia, a fact of which their descendants remain proud. Mouna Rudao himself was for the Japanese, before he was against them.

## A Taiwan blockbuster: Blood-stained rainbow

Written by The Economist

Thursday, 22 September 2011 09:19

---

The film, at least in the first instalment, glosses over such ambivalence. Its message of a unique, empowering Taiwanese identity is unmistakable, and the main reason for its popularity. No Chinese is spoken in the film. Rather, only Seediq and Japanese are used, with Chinese subtitles. Both Taiwan's president, Ma Ying-jeou, and Tsai Ing-wen, his challenger in next year's election, set aside their sniping to sit down to a screening together.

Taiwan has never seen anything like it. The central bank has plans to release a set of coins commemorating the Seediq. The film sets have become a tourist attraction. There are Seediq Bale commemorative wines and ionised water. Han Taiwanese as well as indigenous filmgoers don aboriginal dress for the viewing. As for China, those critics who have seen the film have noted its "provincialism", a slur that mainlanders usually reserve for Taiwan's independence movement.

Source: [The Economist](#)