

'New York Times' runs feature on White Terror film

Written by Taipei Times

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The New York Times ran a major feature about Prince of Tears (淚王子), a movie set in 1950s Taiwan that exposes the brutality of the White Terror, which may surprise readers in the US who know little about Taiwan's bloody past.

The Hong Kong-dated report, published on Tuesday, opens: "The story usually goes like this: China was taken over by Chairman Mao [Zedong (毛澤東)] and became a brutal Communist state. Taiwan broke free and became a vibrant democracy. The ugliness of the last half-century — persecution, martial law, mass execution — happened on the mainland."

"Prince of Tears, the latest film by the Hong Kong-based director Yonfan (楊凡) turns that telling of the story on its head. It is the first major movie in 20 years to explore the White Terror that followed Taiwan's separation from China in 1949. In Taiwan, the ruling Kuomintang, or [Chinese] Nationalist Party, staged anti-Communist witch hunts that killed thousands," the story says.

The "gorgeously crafted" film is said to focus on daily life in a remote Taiwanese village where anyone who commits a political faux pas can be sent to the execution squad.

The New York Times said the film is based on the real-life story of actress Chiao Chiao, who grew up in Taiwan, as did Yonfan.

"It begins like a fairy tale, with this beautiful family playing music in the woods," Yonfan tells the New York Times. "But it's actually a black fairy tale set during the White Terror."

The film tells the story of a young Taiwanese air force pilot, his pretty wife and two young daughters.

After "Kafkaesque political complications" the pilot is executed, his wife put into a prison camp and his daughters sent to live with an eerie government agent nicknamed Uncle Ding, who may have been the informer who turned in their father.

On release, the mother — "under pressure to resume a normal family life and support her girls" — gives in to advances by Uncle Ding and marries him.

Chiao tells the New York Times: "I remember my mother going away and coming back. I remember being separated from my sister and being sent to live with Uncle Ding in a Warehouse. My mother really did remarry. She's still in Taiwan today and 88 years old."

Prince of Tears had its premiere at the 2009 Venice Film Festival last month. It has also been shown at festivals in Toronto and Busan, South Korea, and has been chosen as Hong Kong's submission for the Academy Awards for best foreign language film.

The film was made in Taiwan and extras were hired locally.

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The New York Times asked Yonfan why the subject of the White Terror had been neglected for so long.

“Martial law was only lifted in 1987. After that, people wanted lighter films — comedies, romances, kung-fu flicks. This period of history is a scar on the Kuomintang,” he said. “It’s not a film about correcting a political injustice; it’s a film about human frailty.”

Source: [Taipei Times 2009/10/15](#)