

Taiwanese fund controversial film on spying era in U.S.

WILL TIAO IS PITCHING SILICON VALLEY A DIFFERENT KIND OF BUSINESS PLAN - ONE FULL OF INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE AND EVEN MURDER

By John Boudreau

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Sound like a Hollywood movie? Well, it is, but one based on real events that pitted the dictatorial Taiwanese government of the time against those suspected of leading the democratic movement in Taiwan and the United States.



Will Tiao, center, chats with Dr. C.C. Lin, left, and David Chen at the Taiwanese-American Center in Fremont on March 1, 2007. Tiao is making a movie called "Formosa Betrayed" which is certain to raise controversy in the Taiwanese community. The movie will spotlight the political upheaval in Taiwan during the 1970's. Dr. Lin and David Chen are helping to fund the movie which has not started production yet. (Gary Reyes/ Mercury News)

Bay Area Taiwanese-Americans in recent months have invested and pledged millions of dollars to see the film made. In February, Tiao appealed to Silicon Valley's influential Taiwanese American Industrial and Technology Association for funding.

The project has stirred the political passions of Taiwanese-Americans, some of whom say they were spied upon by their government after moving to the United States decades ago when Taiwan was ruled by martial law. Tiao's perspective on the little-known chapter in Taiwan's history has received significant coverage in the Taiwanese and Chinese press in the United States, made a big media splash in Taiwan and has created controversy as some accuse it of being made to sway Taiwan's 2008 presidential election in favor of the Democratic Progressive Party, or DPP, and its associated coalitions.

Not bad for a movie that has yet to have a single scene shot. Filming is scheduled to begin later this year.



Gina Mao is photographed at the Taiwanese-American Center in Fremont on March 1, 2007. Mao is one of many Taiwanese who are investing money to help produce a movie called "Formosa Betrayed" by director, Will Tiao. The movie will spotlight the political upheaval in Taiwan during the 1970's which is expected to raise controversy within the Taiwanese community. (Gary Reyes/ Mercury News)

U.S. involvement

The plot of the murder of a college professor is set during a painful chapter in Taiwanese history, a time when native Taiwanese and those leading the democratic movement felt persecuted by the Taipei government, a close U.S. ally because of its anti-communist stance.

"This is not an Asian-American identity movie," said Tiao, who has sought support from more than 10,000 Taiwanese, Taiwanese-Americans and Taiwanese-Canadians. "This is aimed at mainstream America."

For many Taiwanese-Americans, the project has struck a deep chord.

"We want people in America to know Taiwan's story," said Helen Lee, who teaches voice at the University of Nevada-Reno. Lee is one of a small army of investors backing the project. The minimum investment is \$25,000.

Ho Chie Tsai, a 35-year-old Berkeley pediatrician, wanted to support a project that speaks to the Asian community. "I've never seen this level of excitement in my community," he added.

Right now, the movie's estimated budget is in the \$10 million to \$12 million range, but that could change upward depending on fundraising successes or a partnership with another film production company. Kansas-born Tiao was an aide to former U.S. Sen. Nancy Kassebaum before becoming a fledgling actor and producer in Hollywood. The movie - the working title is "Formosa Betrayed" (www.formosabetrayed.com) - will attempt to distill Taiwan's complex politics.

Power shake-up

In 1949, Mao Tse-tung's communist forces conquered mainland China. The defeated Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang, or Nationalist, party fled to Taiwan, where they ruled as a government-in-exile.

In 1996, the first direct presidential election was held. In 2000, the opposition DPP won the presidency. The party in large part draws support from native Taiwanese, whose ancestors arrived in Taiwan between 1600 and 1900. The DPP leans toward independence from China, whereas the Kuomintang, or KMT, has a more conciliatory posture.

China claims Taiwan is its territory and has threatened war should the island officially declare independence. The United States, which does not officially recognize Taiwan as an independent nation, has called for a peaceful resolution.

Taiwan's period of martial law spilled over to the United States as the Taiwanese government recruited students to spy on Taiwanese-American professors and others on college campuses. Tiao's script tells the story of a fictional character who is a composite of two real-life personalities.

One was Chen Wen-cheng, a Carnegie Mellon University professor and critic of Taiwan's government who died under suspicious circumstances during a visit to Taiwan in 1981. The other was Chinese-American journalist Henry Liu, killed in 1984 after writing an unflattering biography of Taiwan's strong-arm ruler, Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek. The killing occurred at Liu's Daly City home and was linked to a Taiwan intelligence agent, though the Taiwan government denied involvement.

The movie's story line, Tiao said, follows a detective who, while investigating the murder, begins to realize "people are spying on each other." The cop eventually links the killing to Taiwan, even as U.S. government officials try to steer him away from Taipei.

"Many Taiwanese paid a high price for democracy," observed Taiwan scholar Shelley Rigger.

Tiao said his movie is not intended to be partisan. "Basically, it has to do with oppression," explained the producer, who said his parents warned him when he was growing up in the Midwest to hang up the phone should any caller speak in Chinese. His father, an agricultural economics professor at Kansas State University who immigrated from Taiwan in 1968, was spied upon, Tiao said.

Still, the project is seen differently by others. "It's political propaganda," said James Chung, executive director of a coalition of Taiwanese political parties in the Bay Area, including the KMT. "DPP will use this film to attack the KMT."

Film's message

For supporters, "Formosa Betrayed" is an opportunity to finally air their struggles.

"We never had a chance to speak out, we never had a chance to let people know what the real history of Taiwan was," Gina Mao said. The 49-year-old Hillsborough resident invested in the movie and organized a half-dozen of meetings for other potential backers, including a dinner for 300.

Sui Hwu, 53, who has retired from her Sunnyvale land development and construction company, invested in the project because she was moved by Tiao's concern for Taiwan. "I was so touched," she said, fighting back tears.

It will, though, take equal measures of financing and luck just to get the movie made, let alone get wide distribution. Independently produced movies, in particular, face difficult odds in Hollywood, observed Larry Tanz, chief executive of LivePlanet, the production company founded by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.

For example, he said, thousands of independent movies are submitted to the Sundance Film Festival every year. "Dozens make it, a handful win and only a couple or a few will get wide theatrical distribution," said Tanz, producer on the Emmy-nominated series "Project Greenlight" and upcoming feature film "Running the Sahara."

Nonetheless, he added, relatively low-budget movies can light up the big screen.

"If it's a great screenplay and a great story," Tanz said, "the sky is the limit."

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