

CAPE NO. 7 (2008) by director Wei Te-sheng took the Taiwanese moviegoing audience and later, a worldwide audience by storm, garnering major awards and bringing heightened expectations for a new generation of Taiwanese directors and producers.





No Signs of Slowing DOWN:

**The Renaissance of
Taiwanese Cinema**

By George Chun Han Wang



Movies that give new hope (from left): BLACK AND WHITE EPISODE 1: THE DAWN OF ASSAULT (2012); CAPE NO. 7 (2008); DIN TAO: LEADER OF THE PARADE (2012)

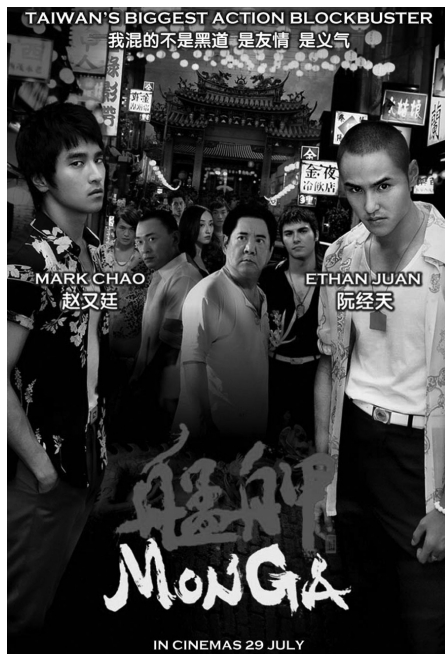
The recent revival of Taiwanese cinema was set in motion in 2008 when Wei Te-sheng enthralled local audiences with his feature directorial debut *CAPE NO. 7*. A romantic comedy about a dejected musician rediscovering passion, love and hope through the transformation of a rock band of misfit amateurs into an overnight concert sensation, *CAPE NO. 7* was released in August to a rather moderate box office draw; however, significant word-of-mouth ensured that Taiwan's audiences promptly discovered and affectionately embraced this homemade sensation which nostalgically touched on the island's complex emotions toward its Japanese colonial past. The sleeper hit then became a must-see event across demographics. During its four-month theatrical run, *CAPE NO. 7* raked in 530 million TWD (17.9 million USD) domestically, setting an all-time box office record for a Taiwanese film.

While a single hit alone could not resuscitate an entire industry, the success of *CAPE NO. 7* certainly delivered a substantially optimistic message to local filmmakers who might otherwise have lost hope, for Taiwan's film industry had begun its downward spiral since the mid-1990s on the back of extensive video piracy and fierce competition from big-budget foreign imports. It mattered little that iconic auteurs such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang and the late Edward Yang, persistently generated accolades at major international film festivals for Taiwanese cinema. Their arthouse masterpieces seemed particularly abstract and unappealing to domestic audiences. Already suffering from the lack of commercial hits, the island's fragile film industry was compelled to endure further competition with unlimited numbers of Hollywood blockbusters, when the Taiwanese government, in a desperate bid to gain legitimate international standing, officially lifted the quota on foreign film imports upon joining the World Trade Organization in 2001.

During some of the most difficult years, Taiwanese films struggled to reach a mere 2% market share of the island's total box office sales. Despite the sizeable 12% gross in

2008 brought forth mainly by *CAPE NO. 7*, the total market share for local films reverted back down to 2.3% in 2009. Skeptics viewed the phenomenal success of *CAPE NO. 7* as a blip on the screen of Taiwan's struggling film industry. And then came *MONGA*, a period gangster saga directed by ex-child actor turned television director, Doze Niu. This ambitious commercial feature opened in theaters over the Lunar New Year holidays, the most coveted release dates normally reserved for Hollywood blockbusters. Armed with an aggressive promotional campaign, *MONGA* instantly climbed atop the island's box office chart, bringing in a remarkable 260 million TWD (8.8 million USD). Trailing behind *CAPE NO. 7*, *MONGA* became the second highest-grossing domestic feature release in Taiwan's history.

Within two years, two locally financed and produced features surpassed the 100 million TWD (3.3 million USD) mark, a milestone-earning figure commonly considered impossible for a local film. The critical and commercial success of *MONGA* confirmed that the *CAPE NO. 7* craze was more than a hiccup, and that the island's film buffs do appreciate and support quality local films. The Taiwanese



Taiwanese hits that went worldwide (from left): MONGA (2010); NIGHT MARKET HERO (2011); YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE (2011)

government hosted a party at the 2010 Tokyo International Film Festival, at which it promoted its impressive line-up, spearheaded by the star-studded MONGA delegation, informing the world that Taiwan's film industry was officially and irrepressibly back. The banners at this red carpet event proudly proclaimed "Taiwan Cinema Renaissance 2010: New Breeze of the Rising Generation."

Credited with being the driving force behind this remarkable recovery, Taiwan's rising generation of filmmakers certainly lived up to those expectations. 2011 was, without a doubt, a historical year for Taiwanese cinema. Local film sales posted an astonishing 332% growth from the already impressive year of 2010, reaching unprecedented earnings of 1.5 billion TWD (50.8 million USD) at the domestic box office. In a market saturated with foreign imports that routinely accounted for 90-plus percent of domestic receipts, Taiwanese films in 2011 relentlessly claimed back 17.5% of the total annual market share, staging a spectacular comeback for the local film industry. Among the 36 Taiwanese films released in 2011, not just one, but four titles reached the 100 million TWD (3.3 million USD) mark, joining the historical ranks of CAPE NO. 7 and MONGA as all-time best-selling Taiwanese films.

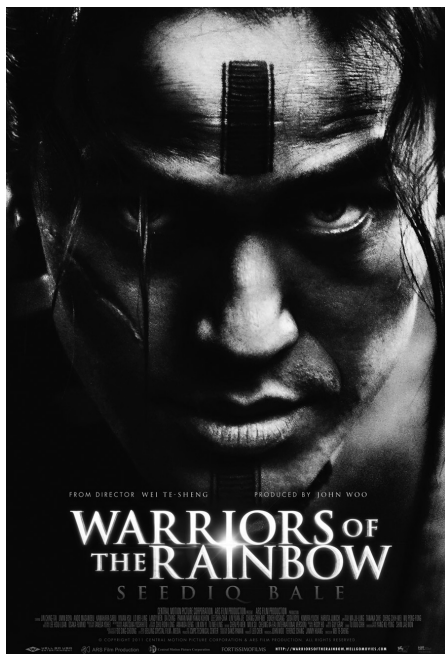
NIGHT MARKET HERO was the first blockbuster of 2011. Taking its lead from the MONGA team, the film was publicized through a very effective marketing campaign culminating in its release during the coveted Lunar New Year holidays. A grassroots comedy about a cheerful group of open-air food stall vendors trying to salvage their outmoded marketplace

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from corrupt land developers, NIGHT MARKET HERO became Taiwan's third locally produced movie to march over the 100-million threshold, grossing an impressive 128 million TWD (4.34 million USD). Written and directed by 35-year-old first-timer Yeh Tian-lun, NIGHT MARKET HERO was also the first Taiwanese movie to be distributed in mainland China under the newly implemented Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), which excludes Taiwanese films from the annual quota for foreign film imports. Although it made a measly 1.2 million CNY (190,000 USD) at the mainland box office, no income is negligible for a film industry rooted in a population of only 23 million. Furthermore, settling into the enormous Chinese market allows for the possibility of potentially unlimited earnings which can only gratify the community of Taiwanese filmmakers, who did not dare be this confident for decades and who are understandably excited about what could

be the golden future of Taiwanese cinema.

The biggest surprise of 2011 was another directorial debut from a first-timer. Thirty-three-year-old popular novelist Giddens Ko adapted his autobiographical best-seller for the screen entitling it YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE, a coming-of-age comedy about teenagers navigating through the bittersweet and bumpy seas of adolescence. Released in August, not only did YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE pull in over 400 million TWD (13.6 million USD) in domestic ticket sales, it also conquered box offices in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. In early 2012, YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE set sales records and became Hong Kong's top-grossing



Hits both at home and afar (from left): WARRIORS OF THE RAINBOW: SEEDIQ BALE (2011); LOVE (2012)

Chinese-language film, surpassing the previous record of 7.85 million USD held by Stephen Chow's blockbuster comedy KUNG FU HUSTLE. In mainland China, it raked in 71 million CNY (11.3 million USD), knocking the 18.9 million CNY (3 million USD) gross of CAPE No. 7 out of its first place to become the best-selling Taiwanese film in China.

Regardless of the extraordinary hype generated by YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE, in Taiwan, the most anticipated cinema of 2011 was undeniably Wei Te-sheng's big-budget epic WARRIORS OF THE RAINBOW: SEEDIQ BALE. Costing 750 million TWD (25 million USD), it is the most expensive Taiwanese film to date. Wei's sophomore effort chronicles an aboriginal tribe's uprising against the colonial Japanese forces in the 1930s, an event chronicled by historians as the Wushe Incident. Despite the graphic violence and language barrier (filmed predominantly in Seediq language and Japanese), the Taiwanese audiences proudly embraced WARRIORS OF THE RAINBOW: SEEDIQ BALE as a must-see national treasure. Released in two parts with a total running time of 276 minutes, the epic grossed more than 800 million TWD (27 million USD) and went on to win the best feature film prize at the 48th Golden Horse Awards, the Chinese-language films' equivalent of the Oscars. As Taiwan's official submission to the Academy Awards, it was the only



This year's favorites: among the early hits of Taiwan's 2012 box office year have been **BLACK AND WHITE EPISODE 1: THE DAWN OF ASSAULT** (top) and **LOVE** (above).

film from East Asia to be shortlisted in the best foreign-language film category, taking precedence over China's official submission, THE FLOWERS OF WAR by Zhang Yimou, coincidentally the most expensive film from mainland China.

At the beginning of 2012, the year of the dragon, a whopping eight Chinese-language films were released during the Lunar New Year movie season, competing for big earnings such as MONGA and NIGHT MARKET HERO had achieved two years before. This year's biggest surprise to date was the emergence of DIN TAO: LEADER OF THE PARADE. A feature debut by veteran television director Fung Kai, this melodramatic underdog grossed more than 316 million TWD (10.7 million USD). By comparison, crime-fighting action thriller BLACK AND WHITE EPISODE 1: THE DAWN OF ASSAULT, a much-hyped

adaptation of helmer Tsai Yueh-hsun's popular television drama series, only managed to generate a bit over 100 million TWD domestically despite its stellar cast and a much more sophisticated marketing campaign. Nevertheless, the gross figure was impressive for the size of the market, and its overseas box-office potential remains optimistic.

The relentless momentum of this real-deal renaissance

was further sustained by a third Taiwanese film which also stepped over the 100-million mark by March 2012. Filmed with both the Taiwan and mainland China markets in mind, Doze Niu's romantic comedy, LOVE, reunited MONGA heartthrobs Ethan Ruan and Mark Chao. The film swept up Valentine's Day weekend audiences in Taiwan and across the strait in China, bringing in more than 160 million TWD (5.4 million USD) plus an unprecedented 129 million CNY (20.5 million USD) in China, thus breaking the mainland record of YOU ARE THE APPLE OF MY EYE.

For a very long time, the Taiwanese film industry remained defiantly independent. This admirable self-reliance was instrumental in the production of the island's most celebrated cinematic works of art; nevertheless, in light of the exponential expansion of the Chinese market, Taiwan is advantageously positioned to benefit from immense box-office potentials on the continent across the Taiwan Strait, without necessarily sacrificing quality to profit. Both LOVE and BLACK AND WHITE EPISODE 1: THE DAWN OF ASSAULT secured considerable co-production investments from mainland China, heralding a new era of significant collaborative possibilities with the Chinese film industry. In this perspective, a highly-skilled creative workforce including a sizeable number of Mandarin-speaking actors who are already well-recognized in China ensure that the Taiwanese film industry is certain to sustain the momentum of its renaissance in its fourth record-breaking year. Taiwanese cinema is showing no signs of slowing down, and the vitality stemming from talent, the quality of productions and their subsequent success continues to encourage young and established filmmakers alike to add exciting new pages to its already extraordinary history.

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TAIWAN SPOTLIGHT

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The Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival is pleased to spotlight the cinema of Taiwan, which is receiving a lot of attention due to the phenomenal worldwide successes of homegrown talents Wei Te-sheng (CAPE NO. 7; SEEDIQ BALE) and recent transplant Arvin Chen (AU REVOIR TAIPEI). We encourage you to check out the following works from Taiwan included as part of this year's Film Festival line-up:

