

# IN THE SPOTLIGHT: WILL TIAO

**Joselyn Lai**

*Editor*

Pacific Times intern Joselyn Lai interviews Will Tiao

In the history of Hollywood, films on Asian and Asian-American issues have been even rarer than the notorious scarcity of Asian roles, but Taiwanese-American Will Tiao aims to break the trend with an upcoming independent film planned for a 2008 release. As executive producer of *Formosa Betrayed*, Tiao, who is also an actor and writer, hopes to shed light on Taiwan's political history, particularly the littleknown events of the White Terror period.

Set in 1983, Tiao's feature film, which is a Formosa Films Production, is based on the actual crimes committed against these American citizens and will focus on the murder of a fictional Taiwanese-American professor at a university in the Midwest. In *Formosa Betrayed*, a white American detective who knows little about Taiwan and nothing about the KMT finds himself embroiled in the homicide case, which turns out to be one of many assassinations within the United States and yet authorized by top Chinese officials of Chiang Kai-shek's government on the other side of the globe. As he further investigates the murder, the detective discovers a tangled

web of international secrets veiled by both the Chinese Nationalist and the United States governments.

Through *Formosa Betrayed*, Tiao hopes to help raise awareness of the oppression, the injustices, and the lack of identity that the Taiwanese people have suffered throughout their recent history at the hands of foreign powers such as the Nationalist Chinese, the Communist Chinese, the Japanese, and even the United States. "Taiwan fought for democracy very, very hard. A lot of people suffered, and a lot of people died," says Tiao. "[It is] one of the leading economic powers in the world and one of the fullest democracies not only in Asia, but anywhere. If the world doesn't stand up and pay attention to that, I don't know what else we can ask for."

Using Hollywood, Tiao endeavors to spread this story of the Taiwanese independence and democracy movement to an American and, hopefully, global audience. "Hollywood has the [world's] biggest distribution machine," he explains, adding that movies are a popular and potent medium that should "have some type of powerful message."

According to Tiao, the America of today is experiencing a political renaissance that creates an environment in which people are interested in what is going on around the world. He believes now is the perfect time to show the worldwide community the history

behind Taiwan's political struggle for independence, a story that explains why the Taiwanese people feel so strongly about their sovereignty and identity. It is for this reason that Tiao has long planned for *Formosa Betrayed* to premiere in 2008, a year that happens to feature Taiwan's fourth democratic presidential elections, compounded with the highly anticipated 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. "A movie about the Taiwanese independence and democracy movement in the middle of that huge media storm of China, China, China is going to guarantee us a degree of attention, and the more likely word is 'controversy,'" explains Tiao with a smile.

Tiao's familiarity with Taiwan's history and political affairs stems from a decade of work in international politics before he entered the entertainment industry as an actor. With politically active first-generation Taiwanese-American parents, he grew up in Manhattan, Kansas, where his father was among the many professors who were spied upon even after moving to the United States. After receiving his masters degree in international affairs from Columbia University, Tiao began an active political career, among other things, lobbying for Taiwan's entrance into the United Nations with the Formosan Association for Public Affairs (FAPA), working under the Clinton Administration as a Presidential Management Intern, and serving as a negotiator on international trade agreements for the current President Bush. Following ten years in the political arena, Tiao then surprised his parents with his decision to leave his position with the United States government to begin a career in the entertainment industry.

Tiao explains, "I thought there was something we could do for Taiwan through Hollywood that would be more effective than anything the Taiwanese have done so far. I personally have [had] experience with what the Taiwanese have tried in Washington, and I've seen how ineffective a lot of it has been."

As soon as Tiao entered Hollywood as an actor, working with famed acting coach Susan Batson and distinguished casting director Paul Weber, he knew he wanted to do a film about Taiwan's independence movement. He began developing a story idea, and one and a half years ago, he began fundraising for his new project, for which he would be executive producer. Since then, Tiao has personally done an estimated 70 fundraisers in roughly 40 cities spanning America, Canada, and Taiwan. His goal, which must be reached by June 30 of this year if he wishes to be able to begin production on *Formosa Betrayed*, is \$10 million. Currently, Tiao, who has spoken to over 10,000 people and has "hundreds of investors," has raised over 90% of this target amount. What makes the film exceptional is that movies rarely, if ever, are financed solely through fundraisers.

"This is a ground-up, grass-roots film, period," Tiao declares. "And it's not just any grass-roots film; it's a grass-roots film that has raised more money than any film that I am aware of in Hollywood." By some estimates, *Formosa Betrayed* has also raised more money than any

other Taiwanese cause in the history of Taiwanese-American fundraising.

The vast majority of Tiao's investors are firstgeneration Taiwanese-Americans.

However, some of his financial supporters also include Taiwanese from Taiwan, white Americans, and even Chinese-Americans. Without active advertisement, the film's website ([www.formosabetrayed.com](http://www.formosabetrayed.com)) has already reached 100,000 hits. Tiao is surprised and feels "very blessed" by the overwhelming support for a film that has not even seen a single scene shot yet. Yet, although the film is very much a community project for Taiwanese-America, at the same time, *Formosa Betrayed* will be just like many other Hollywood independent films of similar budgets and similarly high-profile production teams. Tiao's producing partner, David Allen Cluck, has worked in Hollywood for over 20 years and French-American director Dominique Forma, who has also joined *Formosa Betrayed*, brings to the team his experience with thrillers.

Currently, the team is nearing the end of the first phase of the movie process. If Tiao can convince his investors to put forth the last several hundred thousand dollars before the end of June, *Formosa Betrayed* will move onto the preproduction step, in which Tiao will begin making official offers to actors. If he does not manage to reach his monetary goal, Tiao will have to return all the funds, and the film will not be made; right now, "the stakes are extremely high," but Tiao is confident that he will be able to raise the money by June 30.

At that time, Tiao hopes to find actors who will be interested in the character and in the premises of *Formosa Betrayed*. Furthermore, he also wants actors who are big enough names in the entertainment industry to bring people to theatres while still allowing the story to be the star of the film. Even though, as the producer of an independent film with a relatively low budget, Tiao can only set aside so much of his movie's budget for the actors, who will most likely consider the job "a big pay cut," he is certain that, with such a significant story, actors still have incentive to join. "It's well known that actors will take these types of big pay cuts for a good film," Tiao clarifies. "They're looking for something that will push them up to the next level, like what *Brokeback Mountain* did for Jake Gyllenhaal."

After that point, Stratton and the team will still continue writing new drafts of the screenplay. Also, the title of *Formosa Betrayed* is still subject to change. Tiao considers his choice of this working title to be his "most controversial" decision yet, as some members of the Taiwanese-American community believe the name to have been stolen from George Kerr's 1965 book of the same title but about the 228 Massacre rather than the White Terror.

"It's a working title, so it's not for sure," emphasizes Tiao in response to this complaint. "It may not be the final title. Moreover, my movie is for the broader American audience, [which is largely] clueless about what Formosa is. People think it's an interesting title, and that's my concern. I want [a title] that intrigues them."

As the end of June draws nearer, whether or not Tiao can raise the rest of the money becomes the decisive factor for the fate of this Formosa Films movie. Of course, as an independent film, widespread distribution is still no guarantee even after production is complete, but if his website's 100,000 hits is any indication, *Formosa Betrayed* is already

off to a good start even though a single scene has yet to be filmed.

“I am actually just amazed that we have gotten this far; hundreds, thousands of people have helped us along the way, and I really think that we as a community should be very proud of ourselves,” comments Tiao. “I will do whatever it takes to make this movie because so many people want to see this happen.”

*Editor's Note:*

*Youth Forum is introducing its new feature: “In The Spotlight.” In the Spotlight articles will be based on interviews by Pacific Times journalism interns with contemporary Taiwanese-Americans of noteworthy interest.*