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How may settlers become native? How may he ultimately cease being from somewhere else? Films have traditionally been one important way of approaching these transnational issues. If in *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011), for example, the aliens appear from nowhere and eventually contribute to ostensibly resolve contradictions that are inherent to the settler colonial situation – that is, they turn settlers into natives (Veracini, 2011: 268-272) – there is yet another option. In order to ‘indigenise’, the settler can disappear into nothingness instead (not in reality, of course, merely in filmic reconstruction). Taiwan’s *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (Wei Te-sheng, 2011) pursues this latter strategy.

The film is about an indigenous anti-Japanese insurrection that took place in Taiwan’s central uplands in 1930. It was an incredibly violent affair, and it was ruthlessly repressed in a bloodbath (the film does not spare the details). At the time of the ‘Wushe incident’, as it is referred to, the Japanese invader colonisers were systematically undermining the viability of traditional aboriginal practices and lifestyles. In the eyes of the anticolonial insurgents there was no time left to save their autonomy. The emphasis on violent confrontation could have led to a somewhat unsophisticated way of representing reality, but the film insightfully represents the contradictions of this particular colonial microcosm. *Seediq Bale* is nuanced: while the indigenous Seediq are represented as fractured between an ‘assimilated’ and a ‘wild’ faction (indeed many Seediq collaborated with the Japanese occupiers), the Japanese colonisers are also represented as reacting differently to the challenges of a very complex set of circumstances. Some officers attempt to crush the colonised ‘Other’ at every opportunity; others behaved in a more tolerant and honourable fashion. The film, however, is not only about an anti-colonial insurgency and its aftermath, or about the relationship between indigenous peoples and Japanese invaders. The film is also about Taiwan and its relationship with mainland China.

It is important to note that the film was conceived and enthusiastically received as a nationalist Taiwanese manifesto. It was the most expensive production in Taiwanese history and irreconcilable political opponents even watched it together; while the central bank is planning to release a set of coins celebrating the aboriginal rebels (*The Economist*, 2011). Given the nature of political debate, the Taiwanese public was bound to be interested in a narrative that focused on an Aboriginal struggle in order to affirm a unique Taiwanese identity. Indeed, *Seediq Bale* stimulated a surge of Taiwanese nationalist pride that is somehow baffling if one considers that the descendants of the Chinese settlers that colonised the island in the seventeenth century and now constitute the overwhelming majority of the country’s population are almost entirely absent from its narrative (like the Puritans that crossed the water and went to America approximately at the same time to establish a safe haven away from the political instability of the Old World, these settlers went collectively to the island that would become Taiwan to escape chronic warfare and political unrest: that Taiwan was later subjected to successive waves of colonial domination does not change this foundational fact). Not only they do not feature in the story, very little Chinese is spoken in the film (only Japanese and Seediq languages are spoken; there are Chinese subtitles, however). And it goes beyond
language, and the film is narrated, in director Wei Te-sheng words, ‘through the prism of Seediq beliefs’ (quoted in Yuting, 2011). But if the settlers are not part of the story, a primarily settler constituency enthusiastically embraced the film exactly because of this absence and the opportunities that it opens up. The film, as confirmed in a Taipei Times report of its presentation at the Venice Biennale, was conceived in an attempt to ‘bring peace and harmony to all the ethnic groups in the country’, and to ‘increase the world’s understanding of the [Taiwanese] nation, whose history and culture had been created by the 14 native tribes, as well as Han Chinese immigrants and recent new immigrants from neighbouring countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines’ (Taipei Times, 2011) This is crucial: as the indigenous and the exogenous ‘others’ kill each other off in the film, the cinematically absent but really existing settlers emerge as the new default indigenous collective, a collective that has now ‘indigenised’ and is therefore able to distanciate itself from an overbearing Chinese.

In other words, and paradoxically, the only way to assert a specific indigenous Taiwanese national identity without facing the issue of settler colonialism is to narrate a story of indigenous disappearance and disavow the real settlers; a collective that is absent from the storyline but is very present in the relationship that the film establishes with its implied audience. After all, if there are no Chinese settlers interacting with disappearing indigenous peoples, their descendants are absolved from responsibility and become ipso facto indigenous in a double move that should be emphasised. As Taiwanese indigeneity is asserted via the settler’s identification with an Aboriginal struggle against alien occupiers, the appropriation of indigenous symbols and experience enables an affirmation of the distinction between a specific Taiwanese identity and that of mainland China. It is a Taiwanese version of what Philip Deloria (1998) insightfully defined as ‘Playing Indian’ in the case of the US, and it is significant that Han Taiwanese wore aboriginal dress for the viewing (The Economist, 2011). Seediq Bale is thus a (filmic) declaration of Taiwan’s (settler) independence.

REFERENCES


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