

Taiwan
then after

HONGKONG

A day of Coldest Winter

A film not to China's liking comes off the screen suddenly as Hongkong gets a swift protest from Peking

10 April 81

By Mary Lee

Two recent Taiwan-related incidents show that Hongkong's political relationship with China remains as delicate as ever, despite dramatic improvements since 1978. The first occurred when the British administration, always anxious to keep Hongkong respectful to China, committed an unusual political gaffe when the film censor allowed public screening of a Taiwan production, *The Coldest Winter in Peking*. The film's attack on Chinese communism and the Cultural Revolution's excesses brought an immediate reaction from the local office of China's Xinhua newsagency (Peking's unofficial diplomatic representation).

After a private viewing, red-faced senior government officials explained to the censor, who is more accustomed to excising scenes of gratuitous sex and violence, that *Coldest Winter* was not really the historical account he thought it was. Its closing references to the eventual passing of winter and rising of the sun (the Taiwan flag), coming on top of heavy satire about Maoism, constituted strong anti-communist propaganda. The censor with-

draw his permit after one day's showing.

The other incident, however, was more an example of the government's shadow-boxing with anti-communists in its efforts to keep on the right side of Peking. The Wanderers Association, a declared anti-communist pressure group which champions the cause of illegal immigrants from China was refused registration as a society because the police Special Branch claimed it was funded by Kuomintang elements in Taiwan.

The Wanderers' founder, businessman Chow Hing-chuen, has denied any Taiwan connection, though he admitted that some HK\$50,000 (US\$9,435) of the group's funds came from anti-communists in Hongkong. Other money, he said, came from 1,000 members who each paid HK\$5 to join, and sales of about 7,500 copies of his association's magazine, *Wanderers' Journal*— which has suspended publication after four issues because of financial problems. The advertisers — all Hongkong companies trading with Taiwan — had not paid for the advertisements, he said.

The sudden disappearance of *Coldest Winter* from cinemas brought criticism that the government was over-reacting — and an unusual offer from a local hotelier sympathetic to Taiwan. He launched a special cheap travel-and-accommodation deal to Taiwan for Hongkong people who wanted to see the film. The film's distributor also gave private screenings. He was more surprised that it was passed by the censor than by its hasty withdrawal but claims to have lost HK\$40,000 in advertising costs.

The censor, Pierre Lebrun, said that between seven and 62 films have been banned each year for the past 10 years. *Coldest Winter*, however, is only the second film with a political theme that he has found unsuitable for public consumption "in a long while" — the first being a Taiwanese documentary some time ago.

The Wanderers' failure to secure registration passed without public comment,

largely because there is little public sympathy for illegal immigrants. For his part, Chow maintains that an unspecified number of illegal immigrants were forced underground as a result of a turnaround in government policy last October (REVIEW, Oct. 31, '80), subjecting all unregistered immigrants in Hongkong to repatriation.

Government action in both cases is unlikely to cause controversy. However, the two issues highlight Hongkong's peculiar relationship with China. This was illustrated by another recent incident — the arrival in Hongkong of 80-90 fishing junks from eastern Guangdong province with some 4,000 people on board.

The people said they were fleeing an impending earthquake. The Chinese authorities immediately denied the quake rumours, and the Hongkong Government circulated among the fishermen copies of a pro-Peking daily published in Hongkong, *Ta Kung Pao*, containing official Chinese statements. The boat people ignored the statements and for an anxious two days it

seemed as if nothing short of an appearance by a Guangdong official would convince the visitors they had nothing to fear by returning home. In the event, threats of repatriation by land persuaded the Chinese to sail home.

But despite the display of Chinese (and Hongkong) sensitivity to political propaganda from Taiwan, the colony's role as the main trade link between the two continues to expand. Last year China imported through Hongkong more than HK\$1.2 billion worth of Taiwan products, mostly textiles, black-and-white TV sets and household goods — more than 10 times the 1979 figure. Taiwan, in turn, bought 40% more food, minerals and wool from China in 1980, totalling HK\$390.5 million.

In spite of the vast trade imbalance in its favour, Taiwan was compelled to threaten to revoke the licences of companies trading "knowingly" with China through Hongkong. Taiwan is afraid that finished garments produced in China from these materials would compete with the island's own exports, since labour is far cheaper in China. But the threats have been dismissed in Hongkong by Chinese trading representatives, who maintain that the China market is helping to keep some of Taiwan's industries afloat.

In any event, there is little the Taiwan Government can do, said Richard Tsing, a Hongkong Chinese who acts as Taiwan's trade representative here. "All exports and imports are undertaken by Hongkong companies," he said. Trade, he conceded, was a lot less complicated than the political relationship. □