

## 炸神明 The Gangster's God

### About the film

Every Lantern Festival in eastern Taiwan, a group of men strips bare above the waist, and wearing nothing but red shorts, stands on a sacred palanquin, allowing people to pound their bodies with bottlerockets, singeing their skin. They are believed to be human incarnations of the god Handan. The “Scorching of Handan” has in recent years become a major event in eastern Taiwan – Taidong. Those who take part in the ritual have always been shrouded in mystery, and rumored to be members of the gangster underworld. The documentary “The Gangster’s God” enters the heart of these men’s universe, recording their dramatic lives.

The film delves deeply into the local underworld community of Taidong. Filmed over the course of a year and ten months, it follows four “brothers”: an organizer of the Handan ritual, and three participants of different ages – born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – who all want to stand as a Handan the following year. Their lives are often unstable – during the film, one goes to jail, and another is committed to a psychiatric clinic. Can they successfully stand on the palanquin and serve as human incarnations of the god Handan?

The reason these three underworld members play the role of “living Handans” is to serve the true god in heaven. Some hope to extricate themselves from the life of the Taiwanese underworld; others are learning how to enter into it. Some have worked as hit men. Some still work as strongmen collecting debts. They have all served time in prison, and have committed various crimes. Through this ritual, we can witness the rules and relationships within this small underworld community, as well as the different values that different generations hold toward popular religious beliefs. The questions this film attempts to address are: What do the participants in this ritual gain from it? What is the relationship between popular religious faith and the social structure of this underworld community in Taidong? When they stand on the palanquin as incarnations of Handan, do they represent divinity, or evil? Are they heroes, or rascallions?

Director Ho Chao-ti relates that when she witnessed the “Scorching of Handan” in Taidong several years ago, she discovered that the “human Handans” formed their own small community. At that time, she developed a strong interest in this special group of people. During the process of making this documentary, she discovered that these men, who have the reputation of being gangsters, often have a hard time fitting into mainstream society, but as soon as they stand on the Handan palanquin, they become the focal point of public attention. Ho Chao-ti says, “The ritual of the Scorching of Handan is an essential part of their socialization. The straighter a man stands and the longer he withstands the pain, the more worthy he shows himself to be. During the half hour or more that they stand on the palanquin, through the torment inflicted on their bodies, they are transformed from disdained, insignificant figures into redeemed heroes. This is an extremely dramatic contrast.”

The film’s music is also quite unique. Performed by Chen Guan-yu, leader of the Hohak Band, it is largely based on elements of Minnan (“ethnic Taiwanese”) music, recorded with such authentic instruments as the suona, the erhu and traditional drums. This makes the film tightly paced and extremely precise in its expression of emotions. On the day of the Scorching of Handan, Chen Guan-yu and a recording crew moved among the crowd firing bottlerockets, collecting a variety of sounds.

Unlike other films about the Scorching of Handan, “The Gangster’s God” successfully opens a window allowing the viewer to witness a world hitherto unglimped by outsiders. In the past, most films regarding “living Handans” focused on the colorful folk culture of the bombastic ritual itself, emphasizing its dazzling visual effects. “The Gangster’s God” films from a perspective approaching cultural anthropology, exploring how these people live. Its depth of treatment and the difficulty of its subject matter surpass previous films dealing with similar themes.