

# Film doesn't match novel's scope

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Although you may get your money's worth from the De Laurentis Entertainment Group's lavish epic, "Tai-Pan" (R), it is doubtful that the producer will ever recoup what must have been an enormous investment. "Tai-Pan" is spectacular but disappointing as it fails to achieve its lofty goal of adapting James Clavell's novel for the screen. The novel's scope and richness provide a story far too complex for a two-hour film. The great success of Clavell's "Shogun" — his vast narrative of 16th-century Japan — was, in part, due to the considerable length of the TV miniseries. Of course there is always a subjective issue when favorite or famous

books are adapted for the screen. We bemoan the fact that Hollywood can't film the images the novel stimulated in our heads. But a film is a film and a novel is a novel and never the twain shall meet — at least not as exact translations of one another. A novel is "adapted" for the screen, not "translated," and adaptation involves many changes. Filmmakers face the difficult process of physically visualizing and recording on celluloid complex ideas and scenery that are easily described in writing. CLAVELL'S "Tai-Pan" paints huge portraits of the Orient, the Opium Wars and the British gunboat di-



the movies  
**Dan Greenberg**

plomacy, which led to the establishment of Hong Kong as a British Crown Colony in the 1840s. The British flag followed its traders, and they are the centerpiece of novel and film. Dirk Struan (Bryan Brown) takes the lead in establishing British trade with his arch-rival, Tyler Brock (John Stanton), whose personal and professional rivalries are at the core of "Tai-Pan."

Brock's perverted, sadistic son, Gorth (Bill Leadbitter), eventually wins the friendship of Struan's kindly, religious son, Cullum (Tim Guinee), who has come out to Hong Kong after the death of his mother and sisters from the plague in Glasgow.

Gorth falls in love with Brock's daughter, Tess (Kyra Sedgwick), which, quite obviously, complicates matters. What seemed quite reasonable in the book appears contrived on film. To further confuse the scene, Dirk Struan has a son, Gordon (Russell Wong), by a former Chinese mistress. As well, he has a current Chinese mistress, May-May (Joan Chen).

Then there's Dirk's friend, Aristocrat Quance (Norman Rodway), who lives on a floating Chinese house of prostitution, except when his wife (Barbara Keogh) catches up with him. The huge cast also includes the entire European community in Hong Kong and large numbers of native Chinese who regularly enter and leave the narrative.

IT TAKES the first 20 or so minutes to get into the flow of this complex story but once you do, things flow fairly well and the richness of the story is worth the effort. What diminishes "Tai-Pan" more than plot complications are the ways in which the film trivializes and romanticizes

a complicated story of human greed and passion.

The complex relationships among those who love and hate Dirk Struan are represented by banal dialogue — Brock claims he believes in God but is willing to go to the Devil to destroy his enemy.

Russell Wong's stoic face as half-Chinese son Gordon and Tim Guinee's wimpy portrayal of son Cullum fall completely to project the brotherly bond between these half-brothers fiercely loyal to their father. Joan Chen is attractive as May-May and demonstrates considerable acting range but generally comes across with saccharine cuteness.

The key scene (and fight) in which Struan successfully transports 1.2 million British pounds in silver down a pirate-infested river has none of the tension and all of the contrived nonsense of Hollywood fantasy. It just looks easy. There is no real conflict with the boatload of easily dispelled pirates.

The Hollywood fantasy of "Tai-Pan" is misplaced in this historic romance and leads to an ending at cross-purposes. The film's style demands a conventional, happy Hollywood conclusion. Such is not the case in Clavell's book. Forcing these two opposites together in the film leads to an inane conclusion with all appeal of a TV sit-com rerun.

BUT ALL is not lost. The film is very attractive and quite pleasant to view. The spectacular, scenic vistas and the excellent photography (Jack Cardiff) are worth the trip to your local theater. The expensive location production in China pays off visually as do the spectacular special effects. Those who like flamboyant swash-bucklers and don't mind a fair amount of graphic violence and nudity will probably enjoy "Tai-Pan."



Lin Tao-Hau (seated) is the Imperial High Commissioner, who bans opium trade in "Tai-Pan," based on James Clavell's international best-selling novel.



Joan Chen is May-May, Chinese concubine of Dirk Struan, an early British leader in China trade, played by Bryan Brown, in "Tai-Pan."

## clarification

Tickets for the concert by Orot Haschuna at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield are priced at \$4 for general admission, \$2 for students and seniors. The concert is sponsored by the

Jewish Welfare Federation in cooperation with the Jewish Community Center. For tickets, call the center at 661-1000.

Orot Haschuna (Lights of the Neighborhood) is a 13-member sing-

ing troupe of Israeli young people. The members represent six of Israel's Project Renewal neighborhoods. Project Renewal is a multiyear plan to improve the lives of Israel's immigrant population through a special partnership with world Jewry.

Two of the performers are from Ramla, Detroit's sister city in Israel.

Through Project Renewal, Ramla's library, senior citizens center and dental clinic all have been modernized and maintained.

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