



Fantasy of the Deer Warrior

大俠梅花鹿

Synopsis

Wanshou Film Company
Producer: Zhang Yun (張芸)

Director: Zhang Ying (張英)

Screenplay: Zhao Zhicheng (趙之誠)

Cinematography: Li Xingyi (李興義)

Sound: Liao Shiwu (廖世武)

Editor: Wang Zhengyu (王正堉)

Cast:

Ling Yun (凌芸)

Bai Hong (白虹)

Li Minlang (李敏郎)

Xiao Long (小龍)

Xu Yu (許玉)

1961

Black and White

87 minutes

The animals of the forest live together in harmony. But one day, their arboreal paradise is threatened when a pack of wolves sets upon the lambs. Birdy (Xiao Long) is sent to alert Sika Deer (Ling Yun). However, Sika Deer is in the middle of a fight with Elk (Li Minlang) over the affections of Miss Deer (Bai Hong). By the time he turns up, it is too late. Meanwhile, the devious Foxy is jealous of demure and pure Miss Deer, and tries to trick her by telling her that Sika Deer has died. When she is exiled as a punishment, Foxy conspires with the wolves. Will the forest community be able to unite and fend off a new attack?

Commentary

The characters in *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* are not animation figures, but – rather disconcertingly – played by humans in animal suits. They make today's audiences think about not only Aesop's Fables, but also cosplay and furry fandom. Usually pegged as a children's film, *Deer Warrior* defies classification and there is nothing else like it among Taiwanese-language films – although there is a faint echo of MGM's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

During recent efforts to revive Taiwanese-language films, *Deer Warrior* is the film that has captured younger audiences' interest. Online commentators frequently declare it to be “kuso.” Written in roman letters, this Japanese word has changed its original meaning (“sh*t”) since being imported into Taiwan. Now it means “hilarious!” and is applied to anything camp or parodic. In other words, *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* is celebrated as a cult movie. This perspective is not without basis, but it could lead to disappointed expectations.



The cult movie quality of *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* does go beyond the cute dances and bizarre antics of the furry characters. Operating with limited resources, Taiwanese-language cinema took shortcuts that make audiences today laugh. When Birdy (played by a child actor) takes the message to Sika Deer, he “flies” by hanging on a wire and flapping his arms. In the opening scenes, rather than compose new music, the gambolling lambs are accompanied by the *Jingle Bells* tune, although it is not Christmas. And so on.

However, *Deer Warrior* is not one quirky surprise after another. Most of the film is straightforwardly told, and even preachy at times. Furthermore, in the context of the Cold War and the “White Terror” era of Martial Law in Taiwan, more sombre allegories lurk beneath the seeming innocence of a tale for children. Although sika deer are not unique to the island, they are sometimes seen as especially Taiwanese, encouraging people to see the film as a metaphor for Taiwan’s situation. The air raid sirens that accompany the attack of the wolves might remind us of mainland China’s threats to invade the island, and the difficulties the animals face in uniting against the wolves might make us think of the divisions in Taiwan society. But the meaning of allegory is always in the eye of the beholder. And some of today’s web commentators claim that the wolves are not the Communists, but “obviously” the Kuomintang government itself. From their point of view, the wolves’ attack symbolizes the violent suppression of the Taiwanese local people’s 1947 uprising, which led to 40 years of Martial Law.

Although *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior* might look low budget to us, in the threadbare but popular context of Taiwanese-language cinema, it was a prestige project. It was shot on location in the hills around Beitou, the area north of Taipei considered the Hollywood of Taiwanese-language cinema. And the budget was two to three times the average for the times. This investment was encouraged by the huge popularity of Taiwanese-language cinema in the late 1950s, and the production of *Deer Warrior* marks the first crest of Taiwanese-language film production.

Director Zhang Ying was born in China. He was sent to Taiwan in 1948 by the Shanghai-based Cathay Film Company. Together with his producer on *Deer Warrior*, Zhang Yun, he co-directed one of the first feature films produced on the island after the end of Japanese rule, *The Legend of Alishan (Alishan Fengyun)*. He went on to direct many more films, including another megahit with cult status today, *The Best Secret Agent*, which is also included in our *Taiwan’s Lost Commercial Cinema* season. As a mainlander working in both Mandarin and Taiwanese-language cinema, he challenges the common assumption that the two cinemas were entirely separate.

Ling Yun, who plays Sika Deer, and Bai Hong, who plays Miss Deer, both had long careers as major stars. Capitalising on the action skills he displays in *Fantasy of the Deer Warrior*, after completing his military service in Taiwan, Ling Yun joined Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong, and became a martial arts star. He appeared in at least 100 films. Bai Hong appeared in at least 36 films. Starring in *The Best Secret Agent*, her role is so different from the demure Miss Deer that she is almost unrecognisable.