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In his Hong Kong movies — very different from his Stateside ones, in which he seems content to pander to ethnic stereotypes — Chan has been trying gradually to wean his Asian fan base away from pure kamikaze fare. For instance, “Gorgeous” (1999) took him into romantic comedy peppered with occasional fighting. “Spy,” however, marks a return to the splashier East-West action-adventure pics that have dotted his career. On every level it’s superior to his last one, the uneven “Police Story 4 — First Strike” (1996), and shows Chan surrounding himself with a new breed of behind-camera talent.

For a start, scripter Ivy Ho’s background is in character-driven dramas, and while “Spy” never plumbs any psychological depths, it does have more

character underpinning than Chan’s previous action vehicles. Equally important, the star is served here by a director, Teddy Chen, whose short career has progressed in large steps from the slick “Mission: Impossible” ripoff “Downtown Torpedoes” to the ambitious, big-budget “Purple Rain.” On a purely tech level, Chen gives “Spy” the feel of a fully directed movie in which Chan happens to

star, rather than a purely utilitarian vehicle of the type blueprinted by Chan’s longtime helmer Stanley Tong.

In remote eastern Turkey, a rare type of pneumonia has devastated the region, and a U.S. news crew is gunned down while reporting on the ground; meanwhile, a mysterious character, Park Won-jung, turns up at the South Korean embassy in Istanbul.

In Hong Kong two months later, antsy gym equipment salesman Buck Yuen (Chan) tries to foil a bank robbery and — in a succession of nifty stunts ending up on a swinging construction crane — is pursued by both robbers and police when the swag accidentally ends up in his hands. Buck is hailed as a hero by the local press, fueling his private dream of being a famous adventurer.

Buck’s fantasies seem to come true when he’s approached by a seedy P.I., Many Liu (local comedian Eric Tsang), whose client is looking for a Hong Kong orphan born in 1958 that could be his long-lost son. Intrigued, Buck signs up, and is flown to Seoul to meet the same Mr. Park seen briefly in pic’s opening. The orphaned Buck suspects Park could, in fact, be his father and when he learns from Korean-American reporter Carmen (Kim Min-jeong) that Park was a notorious North Korean spy who recently defected to the South, he accepts Park’s deathbed challenge of a game that could net him big bucks.

With Carmen’s help and some unlikely leaps of imagination, Buck ends up in Istanbul, where he solves Park’s riddle and comes into possession of a deadly germ, Anthrax II, which is also eagerly sought by a Chinese hoodlum, Mr. Zen (Taiwanese thesp Wu Hsing-kuo).

Pic’s grueling shoot last summer in Turkey has yielded atmospheric results: Istanbul, especially, is captured in a refreshingly natural way, with a cleverly choreographed sequence in the spice souk in which Buck, escaping naked from a Turkish bath, tries to hide his private parts with a variety of exotic artifacts. Without overdosing on the tourist sites, the movie moves smoothly from photogenic locations to ordinary back streets, with Wong Wing-hang’s graceful lensing and Peter Kam’s Near East-flavored

score always keeping the eyes and ears involved.

Chen’s firm directorial hold on the movie is never better demonstrated than in the introduction of Zen’s junkie “ward,” Yong (Taiwanese sexpot Vivian Hsu). In a magical sequence that would have been unheard of in Chan’s earlier movies, she’s first seen drifting through a hotel, like a singing siren, an orphan soulmate to Buck who’s bewitched into saving her from Zen.

Despite being cannily cast to appeal to a wide spectrum of Asian auds, pic moves naturally between a variety of dialects and languages, from Cantonese and Mandarin to English and Korean, and unlike some of Chan’s earlier foreign-set pics doesn’t milk its host countries for xenophobic laughs. Multi-

territorial cast blends easily, with only Korean-American actress Kim (aka Kim Min) a little stiff as the reporter with an agenda.

Skilled stunt coordinator Tung Wai has come up with a variety of ingenious sequences that remain true to Buck’s character of an agile but not superhuman hero, rather than simply dreaming up ways in which Chan can almost

kill himself. Kudos, too, to French carstunt expert Jean-Claude Lagniez, who did sterling work on John Frankenheimer’s “Ronin,” for his staging of the “Speed”-like climax set on a burning gas-tanker, which also combines character humor with action.

The huge (by H.K. standards) budget, variously reported between \$17 million and \$25 million, has gone on quality location work rather than hardware, with shooting alone spread over four months. (An extraordinary sequence, tagged on after the end credits, seems to hint at a sequel.) Pic’s Chinese title literally means “Special Agent’s Maze City,” referring to Buck’s discombobulation in Istanbul.

‘Spy’ has more character underpinning than Chan’s previous action vehicles.

THE ACCIDENTAL SPY

(TAKMO MAI SING)

(HONG KONG)

A Golden Harvest (in Hong Kong)/Dimension Films (in U.S.) release of a GH Pictures (China) production. Produced by Raymond Chow. Executive producer, Jackie Chan. Executives in charge of production, Stephen Chu, David Chan.

Directed by Teddy Chen. Screenplay, Ivy Ho. Camera (color, widescreen), Wong Wing-hang; editor, Kwong Chi-leung; music, Peter Kam; art director, Kenneth Mak; costume designer, Shirley Chan; sound, in Dolby Digital; stunt coordinators, Tung Wai, JC Stuntmen’s Team; car stunts, Jean-Claude Lagniez. Reviewed on videodisc, London, June 20, 2001. Running time: 108 MIN.

Buck Yuen Jackie Chan
 Many Liu Eric Tsang
 Yong Vivian Hsu
 Carmen Wong Kim Min-jeong
 Mr. Zen Wu Hsing-kuo
 Cheung Alfred Cheung
 Philip Ashley Anthony Rene Jones
 TV reporter Glory Simon
 (Cantonese, English, Mandarin, Korean, Turkish & French dialogue.)

By DEREK ELLEY

After several years of transition, Jackie Chan finally gets the mix right in “The Accidental Spy,” an entertaining meld of far-flung locales and criminal shenanigans that sees the 47-year-old action star comfortably combining the twin demands of action and maturity. Despite a lack of jaw-dropping stunts — which disappointed some of his Hong Kong fans — the movie still managed to clock up, with aggressive marketing, a very healthy HK\$30 million (\$3.8 million) over Chinese New Year, going head-to-head with Johnnie To’s popular costume comedy “Wu Yen.” For Western auds, pic has a technical smoothness, good use of locations and greater emphasis on character that could make it a solid performer among buffs, with a long life on ancillary.

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