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A CITY OF SADNESS - Subtitle list

A CITY OF SADNESS (Introduction) — Before dialogue begins

Taiwan is an island of 36,000 square kilometres located off the southeast coast of China. In the 16th century it fell under the colonial rule of Portugal, Holland and Spain. But after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Japan ruled the island for the following 51 years.

When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II in 1945, Taiwan was returned to China. The Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek sent envoy to the island to effect the transfer of power and the people of Taiwan rejoiced at their return to the embrace of the motherland. Their joy was short-lived. The end of the war meant a shrinking of the economy and the islanders began to suffer from rampant inflation. A sudden influx of unemployed mainlanders added to the economic crisis. The Taiwanese were appalled at the corruption they witnessed amongst the Nationalist advance corps and soon grew disillusioned and angry. A wedge of mutual distrust and hatred began to drive the Taiwanese and mainlanders apart. Finally, on 28 February 1947, simmering resentments exploded in an incident in which Taiwanese physically attacked mainlanders. The Government transferred troops to Taiwan from the Mainland, and the tragedy of suppression began.

The confusion of spoken dialects is a special feature of this time which is reflected in the film. Different dialects reflect not only differences in customs and lifestyles but also can become the basis for friction and conflict. In the film, native Taiwanese speak Taiwanese, Japanese (which they were forced to learn during the Japanese occupation) and Hakka; the mainlanders speak Peking dialect, Cantonese, Shanghaiese and Chekiang dialect, depending on where they are from. Even today, the fact that Chinese people speak so many different and often mutually unintelligible dialects remains an ongoing source of friction and conflict.

'A City of Sadness' portrays the trials and tribulations of a family caught up in the dramatic events of this tumultuous time. Old man Lin has four sons. The eldest, Wen-Heung, owns a nightclub called 'Little Shanghai'; the second son, Wen-Sum, went missing in action during the war; the third son, Wen-Leung, becomes involved with a Shanghaiese gang smuggling drugs after the war and the fourth son, Wen-Ching, owns a photo studio which is also a meeting place for patriotic intellectuals.