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Jackie Chan shows off his darker side

There are two Jackie Chans.

The Jackie Chan we know is the comedic action hero-sidekick in American blockbuster movies, who performs all of his own audacious and acrobatic stunts and is always cast as a cop, detective or spy.

The other Jackie Chan is the China-based writer, producer, director and singer, a protege of Bruce Lee, who studied with the Chinese opera and is a major recording star. In China, where he first appeared in movies at age 7, he now plays a variety of dramatic movie roles, in addition to delivering his signature self-performed death-defying stunts.

"The Foreigner" is where the two Chans meet. In this political revenge thriller, based on Stephen Leather's novel "The Chinaman," Chan draws from both identities to play Quan Ngoc Minh, the mild-mannered proprietor of the Happy Peacock takeout restaurant; but in fact, he is secretly a Vietnamese former special forces agent whose wife and two daughters were murdered by pirates as the family fled Vietnam.

He lives in London with his surviving daughter Fan (Katie Leung). Lively and lovely with a crisp British accent — and British boyfriend — the teenaged Fan attends a sixth form college (prep school) and is preparing to attend a school dance.

She has selected the perfect dress. Hurrying to beat closing, Quan drives her to the dress boutique. They arrive just in time for Fan to be killed when a firebomb decimates the bank next door to the shop.

A group that calls itself The Authentic IRA, unhappy with the



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

peace accords, takes responsibility for the bombing.

And so the grieving, distraught Quan devotes himself to the grim work of tracking down the bombers and avenging his daughter's death.

But first he must find out who they are. And Pierce Brosnan, as Liam Hennessy, must tell him.

Hennessy is a former Sinn Fein leader who is now an Irish deputy minister. He was a member of the IRA for 30 years, went to prison and now he works on both sides trying to create peace — or so he says.

Hennessy is something of a double agent, giving orders to the bombers while negotiating with them on behalf of the British government.

Chan as the solemn Quan, makes sense to viewers in the context of his sober circumstances.

But Brosnan still carries a strong James Bond identity and it's disconcerting to see him in this role, not because he is a villain, but because he is a passive and disloyal one, authoritative yet ineffective — the anti-Bond.

Decades after the Irish peace

accords and having experienced terrorism on the U.S. mainland in the interim, it's also disconcerting for the audience to be reminded of the romanticized role the IRA plays in our memories.

In fact, the specific misery of Hennessy's marriage is that his wife Mary (Orla Brady) remembers the dashing Sinn Fein militant she married. She wants him, not the appealing quasi-diplomat Hennessy has become. Now, in her eyes, he's an old man afraid to use his power, trying to hold on to whatever power he's got left. She won't forgive him, either, for failing to avenge the death of her brother.

So Quan and Hennessy, Chan and Brosnan, with only a fraction of the physicality we've grown to expect from them, are forced to match wits.

Fights and firebombs are plentiful to be sure, but the older, somber Chan as Quan wins the day through cleverness and the application of his experience, not circus-tent athleticism.

"The Foreigner" was financed primarily by Dalian Wanda, the Chinese Global-500 real estate, finance and entertainment megaconglomerate that owns AMC Theaters. It seems likely that Chan's financiers were willing to place their bet on Chan the dramatic actor because of their familiarity with the range of his Chinese language films.

This bet paid off in the box office, where the movie has made four times as much internationally than in the U.S. domestic box office.

Following the money, it seems that subdued characters in solid, midrange movies are what we can expect from Chan in the future, although "Rush Hour 4" is rumored to be nearing a deal. Maybe Chan will appear in one last action blockbuster — just for kicks.