Culture



Sky Yang in "Last Days," a dramatic retelling of the life of missionary John Allen Chau who was killed in 2018 while proselytizing the inhabitants of a North Sentinel Island tribe. (Sundance Institute/Tanasak "Top" Boonlam)



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***Editor's note:*** *This review contains mild spoilers for "Last Days."*

In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul writes, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." The verse came to mind as I watched Justin Lin's "Last Days," a dramatic retelling of the life of missionary John Allen Chau, who was killed in 2018 while proselytizing the inhabitants of a North Sentinel Island tribe. It's one often cited by evangelists contextualizing the Gospel message to a specific community or group. But in the context of "Last Days," it's the reason why the film fails.

By trying to be "all things to all people" — wanting to both affirm Chau's humanity and criticize the cocktail of motivations that drove him — the movie turns an interesting story tepid.

The grasp to complicate Chau's story beyond a tale of religious devotion gone awry is admirable, but its disparate elements result in something more muddy than it is holistic. While the synergy between Lin's blockbuster sensibilities and interior character work enlivens this retelling — distinguishing it from the interview-driven 2023 documentary "The Mission," from directors Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss on the same subject — it is ultimately hindered by the creative liberties taken in an attempt to make the story more cinematic.

Actor Sky Yang's performance as Chau is arresting; it's a testament to Yang's range that we both feel for Chau and are also infuriated by him as scenes alternate between his years as an adventure-loving student to eventual reckless missionary. There's a glint in Chau's eyes bordering on madness as he pontificates about saving lost souls, and in one particularly uncomfortable sequence Chau excels in missionary boot camp (where volunteers pretend to be members of an uncontacted tribe) while team members around him crack under the pressure.

But it's a testament to Yang's depiction that Chau never feels contemptible. He may be misguided, but he is earnest. Yang knows how to hold those aspects in harmony.

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Lin, perhaps best known for directing installments of "The Fast and Furious" franchise and 2016's "Star Trek Beyond," brings his blockbuster filmmaking in measured ways here, to exciting and visceral effect.

The opening scene of Chau's first evangelization attempt is as pulse-pounding as any action scene Lin has filmed: As the Sentinelese throw a seemingly never-ending supply of spears at him, Chau attempts to duck and weave for cover under his flimsy canoe. Lin's employment of first person point of view puts viewers right in the middle of the action, as does the frenzied editing; it's the type of kinetic filmmaking that elevates the story in an honorable way.

Less honorable perhaps are the creative liberties Lin takes with the storyline. In one scene, after Chau's first attempts to convert the Sentinelese goes awry, he returns, shaken, to a nearby island and socializes with some tourists, engaging in a passionate sexual tryst with one named Melanie (Marny Kennedy). When Chau shares his failed attempt at converting the Sentinelese, Melanie is horrified and leaves Chau. This is one of the last interactions Chau has before he begins his second voyage to the island, where he eventually is killed.

While what's explored here is interesting in that Lin points to the ways Chau's social isolation may have propelled him to be more zealous in his missionary work, to hinge this on an intimate story that may or may not have happened doesn't sit right when the subject is deceased.

Chau's life has been deservedly presented as a cautionary tale of evangelism gone wrong, and with the release of "Last Days," it also challenges us to practice discernment of where we may confuse personal ambition with divine command. Just as Chau felt split between the multiplicity of voices vying for his life and attention, "Last Days" is a house divided between its thematic strands; in trying to be all things, it only ends up more wayward, lost and adrift.