

Malu tianshi (Street Angel)

馬路天使

date: 1937

director: Yuan Muzhi

lyricist: Tian Han

starring: Zhao Dan (male) and Zhou Xuan (female)

cast: Musician (Zhao Dan); Newspaper Vendor (Wei Heling); Young Singing Girl (Zhou Xuan); Qin Player (Wang Jiting); The Hooligan (Ma Zhicheng); The Parasite (Chen Yiting); Chief Barber (Qian Qianli); Barbershop Owner (Tang Guofu); Hawker (Shen Jun); Unemployed Person (Qiu Yuanyuan); Young Widow (Yuan Shaomei); Street Walker (Zhao Huishen); The Procuress baomu (Liu Jinyu); Lawyer (Sun Jing); Man Fallen on Hard Times (Xie Jun); Woman Fallen on Hard Times (Liu Liying); Policeman (Han Yun); Landlord (Li Tiaozhi); Playboy (Yao Ping); Chauffeur (Yuan Afa)

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Zhao Dan and Zhou Xuan were probably the most famous movie stars of the 1930s and '40s. Zhao Dan, in addition to being an well-known actor was a political dissident against the Kuomintang or Nationalist government. Zhou Xuan, the heart-throb of a generation, is still widely known today for her singing, having acquired the nickname jin sangzi (golden throat).

The film opens with the credits superimposed over real-life scenes of Shanghai in the 1930s, starting with the neon signs of various nightclubs and bars, some in English and some in Chinese, which suggest the cosmopolitan nature of what was then China's largest and most "developed" city. Next we are shown flashes of daylight scenes -- the impressive edifices, the foreign-style parks, and the well-dressed middle and upper-class Chinese who frequented them. The traffic seems imposing at first, later out of control. Music becomes ominous. The crowd scenes become oppressive. They are, in turn, contrasted with the towering steeples of foreign churches, then the domes of banks, the customs house, and entertainment centers.

The camera's eye then focuses on the top of one of Shanghai's newest and most impressive skyscrapers (motian dalou) and slowly moves its way down. In white characters, we are given the date: "AUTUMN, 1935". The words "AT THE SUBTERRANEAN LEVELS OF SHANGHAI" then appear on the screen and the story begins with a drum-roll.

First we see Zhao Dan (called Xiao Chen), who plays a musician in a for-hire marching band, the type which abounded in treaty-port society and would be hired out by mid-level to well-to-do families for weddings and funeral processions. These bands

wore western-style uniforms and played western-style music. The hybrid nature of the wedding procession we see, embodying elements of both traditional Chinese convention (the bride is carried in a veiled sedan chair and wears a traditional outfit, there are Buddhist monks, prayer flags and traditional musicians in the procession as well) reflects the schizophrenic nature of life in treaty-port society.

Zhao rents a room in a slum-like apartment complex ironically called Taiping li (Lane of Great Tranquility). His roommates, neighbors and associates are newspaper vendors, street hawkers and a shop full of lower-class barbers as well as the young singer (Xiao Hong), played by starlet Zhou Xuan. The singer has been sold in childhood to her owner, the Qin player and his wife the procuress (who also "owns" and older woman, Xiao Yun, whom she has forced into prostitution as a yeji or "street walker").

We see the Qin player and Xiao Hong perform in a teahouse. When first asked to sing by customers, she sings "A Song of the Four Seasons" (si ji ge), i.e. one which speaks of the times. The lyrics tell of a pair of mandarin ducks (symbolic of lovers) who are rent asunder by war (an allusion to the impending Japanese invasion -- by 1935 there had already been fighting in the north and around Shanghai as well). At this point a fat underworld figure called Mr. Gu (his surname is a homonym for "antiquity") takes a fancy toward the singing girl, making bold to touch her person as he compliments her singing.

At home in the Great Tranquility Apartments we get a glimpse of her life. She is constantly being rebuked by her owners and is intimidated by the grave visage of the black-clad street walker. Her few moments of joy are spent in the company of her neighbors, the musician and the newspaper vendor. Apparently her owner the Qin player has had some sort of sexual affair with the street walker, because we overhear him attempting to rationalize his failure to come to her defense when his wife suspected them and beat her. We assume that both women, as white slaves, are subject to frequent beatings by the procuress.

The second song is sung by Xiao Hong as she flirts in an innocent way with the musician. The song is a form of dialogue and suggests tragedy at a national-level in the north -- again, the actions of the lovers in the song hint at the Japanese invasion. Moreover, we are told: "Friendships formed amid adversity are the deepest."

Mr. Gu and his henchmen frequent the barbershop downstairs from the Tranquility Apartments in preparation for a "date" with the young singer, which has been arranged through the Qin player and his wife the procuress. He takes her and her owner out for a meal, first buying her a piece of "foreign cloth," probably material for a dress. This she accepts, unaware that it is

intended as a sort of betrothal gift. When the musician learns of this from his friends, he is angered and, in a jealous rage, flings the cloth out the window into the street. With the musician thinking that she plans to forget about him and go with Mr. Gu simply because the latter has money, they quarrel and she walks out, the situation misunderstood on both sides.

Later, when the musician and the newspaper seller are drinking in a wineshop, he spots Xiao Hong on the stairs there and demands that she sing for him, since he is a paying customer. This underscores her place in society as being only one step above that of a prostitute. She is humiliated and grieves as she sings a "Song about Finding Oneself the Ends of the Earth" (Tianya ge) -- one that underscores feelings of alienation and isolation. The musician is saddened, too, and leaves, causing a stir. Lao Wang, the newspaper vendor, smooths things over.

Mr. Gu arrives at Xiao Hong's owners' apartment to present more gifts in order to ask for her hand. Shocked and mortified, she has only the street walker to turn to for comfort. The street walker advises her to swallow her pride and tell the musician of her plight. She is reluctant at first, but finally does so. At her appearance, the older newspaper vendor counsels the musician toward moderation. They make up once the true nature of the situation becomes clear to the musician.

The newspaper vendor spots a news item on an old newspaper they have used for wallpaper about a procurress being sued by one of her "charges" (yang nü). The musician then suggests they see a lawyer, whose name (Wang Naifa -- "Wang Who Is The Law") and address they also see in an ad. Riding an elevator to the attorney's office atop a skyscraper, they disembark, exclaiming: "This is like being up in heaven!"

The lawyer, Mr. "Wang Who Is The Law," is the only high-class Chinese we see in the film. He uses terms such as qisu (to litigate) instead of more common words like da guansi, which give the friends some difficulty. When he informs them that he charges "Five hundred ounces of silver to appear in court..." they leave, discouraged.

At home, another newspaper ad "Missing Person Wanted," inspires them to flee. The musician tells Xiao Hong they will elope together. When she expresses trepidation, he reminds her of the number of friends/brothers (dixiong) he has everywhere to help them. That night he mimics a revolutionary general inciting the masses, which humors and encourages Xiao Hong. When she invites the street walker to join them, the latter refuses, saying that the musician and his merry men look down on her as a prostitute. The two women find comfort in each other's arms.

After they flee the street walker is left to face the wrath

of the procuress who hopes to beat the whereabouts of Xiao Hong out of her. The Qin player, unable to watch, makes an excuse to leave. The rod-wielding procuress orders her to close the door, to disrobe and come toward her. As undergarments fall, the camera suddenly switches from the beating scene to a massage parlour in a bath house -- from women beating each other to men massaging each other. There Mr. Gu is informed by the Qin player that Xiao Hong has taken flight.

At the barber shop, Xiao Hong is given a permanent in an attempt to disguise her. The musician gives her a new piece of cloth, symbolic of their union. The youngest apprentice asks the newspaper vendor why he is always pasting newspapers to the wall as wallpaper. He replies: "This broken wall makes me feel sad" (a reference to the body-politic of China, or the imperfection of their lives perhaps).

Their motley gang of friends put on a wedding dinner for Xiao Hong and the musician at which he performs a magic trick called baiyin chukou (a word-play meaning "all our silver exported"), a veiled criticism of the Nationalist government's fiscal policies. The next day the owner of the barbershop comes to tell his employees he can not afford to pay them their back-wages. They are aghast.

Lao Wang, the newspaper vendor seeks out Xiao Yun, the street walker, and urges her to flee her owners and join them. One rainy night, when confronted by a policeman, she does so. The musician, though outraged, eventually speaks up for her, and the policeman allows her to stay. Lao Wang then buys her medicine and urges her to leave prostitution.

The landlord who owns the barber shop then sends a thug to collect rent, threatening to evict the entire crew if the rent is not paid in three days. The musician decides to drum up business for them by playing out of their store-front, but this only attracts a group of Buddhist monks, who already have shaven heads. When the thug assigned to collect the rent shows up, however, the barbers mistake him for a potential customer and forcibly shave his head. In a rage, he breaks up the shop.

The Qin player tells Mr. Gu he has discovered Xiao Hong's hiding place (probably by following the street walker there). The next day when they go looking for Xiao Hong, the street walker spots them through the window first and tells Xiao Hong to flee. When they enter and try to force her to talk, the street walker throws a knife at her former "owner". Lacking the strength or determination to kill him, she misses, but he throws the knife back at her, striking her in the left side of the chest.

When Xiao Hong reaches the musician (Xiao Chen) and the newspaper vendor (Lao Wang), a quarrel ensues between the two men

when Xiao Chen asks Lao Wang whether or not it is worth taking risks to defend "that sort of woman." The musician ends up apologizing.

Bringing the wounded street walker back, Lao Wang leaves to get a doctor. As she lies dying, the musician apologizes to her for having rejected her in the past as an unclean woman because she was a prostitute. She replies: "There is no need for anyone among us to ask forgiveness of the other. We are all persons who have shared the same bitter fate." Waiting for Lao Wang's return, the street walker sees a policeman through the window, whom she mistakes for him. In her delirium she then imagines the police have arrested Lao Wang and pleads for his release, saying: "Let him go. He is a good man who helps the poor." She then mutters her last syllables: "Ants....Ants" (meaning "We are all ants!") and dies.

Lao Wang returns, saying: "I didn't have enough money, so the doctor wouldn't come." As Xiao Hong sobs, the camera returns to the black subterranean depths below the skyscraper. Slowly it works its way up the skyscraper to the very top.

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questions for discussion:

1. What kind of social critique of modernization do you think is implicit in this film?

-- The "modernization" of third-world countries does not necessarily bring equality and justice with it. In some instances, injustice is magnified.

2. Is this critique still valid today?

3. What about gender roles?

4. Are the only bad people men?

5. Is the procuress more the agent of oppression than her husband the Qin player? Why?

6. Why do women oppress other women?

7. What themes do you think this film stresses?

-- Class unity, team spirit, an end to male-female exploitation, an end to female-to-female and female to male exploitation, an end to the worship of the superficial trappings of the Western.

8. What do you think the top of the skyscraper symbolizes at the very end of the film?

-- It might be heaven, as the musicians naively exclaim when they first get off the elevator, but it might also be Olympus, in the sense that it is the abode of those who are responsible for the state of affairs down below. In Chinese, the mortal world is sometimes referred to as xia tu (the earth below).