

Wuya yu maque (Crows and Sparrows)

烏牙鳥與麻雀

date: 1949

director: Zheng Junli, Kunlun Studios

script: Chen Baichen

cast (partial): Zhang Lide (as Lao Wei); Zhao Dan (Shopkeeper Xiao), Wang Pei (Xiao Amei); Sun Daolin (Hua Jiezhi), Hua Zongying (Yu Xiaoying), Shangguan Yunzhu (Mrs. Hua), Wu Yin (Mrs. Xiao); Xu Weijie (Da Mao); Wei Heling (Kong Youwen); Li Baoluo (The Principal); Li Tianji (Hou Yibo)

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By the winter of 1948 the Kuomintang or Nationalist army was being routed in the civil war against the Communists. During the Japanese occupation of Shanghai (1941-1945) a collaborator surnamed Hou (a homonym of "Monkey") expropriated an apartment building from its rightful owner, old Mr. Kong. At the outset of the film, the collaborator, now an officer in the Nationalist army, is attempting to lease the building to a new landlord prior to his flight from Shanghai to Taiwan with his mistress.

In order to make the building more presentable to prospective lessees, Hou wants first to evict all the current tenants. After Hou's mistress delivers the bad news, the tenants approach old Mr. Kong about claiming back the building. Hou expropriated the building from him during the Japanese occupation by saying that Kong's son had gone off to join the resistance (the communist-led New Fourth Army). After the Second World War ended, Hou claimed he had actually been an underground worker against the Japanese; the Nationalists reaccepted him into governmental service and allowed him to keep the property he had confiscated because they opposed the New Fourth Army as well. Kong is pessimistic about his chances of getting justice, given Hou's connections in the present government. The tenants then ask Mr. Hua, an intellectual who has been burning his own books in anticipation of a political crackdown by the desperate Nationalist authorities, to represent them to Hou. Hua is reluctant, saying that he'll cross Hou too easily and thus the negotiations will get nowhere. Meanwhile, Hou returns from Nanjing (the Nationalist capital) and begins to make advances toward Hua's wife.

At the Zhongzheng (Chiang Kai-shek) Middle School where he teaches, Mr. Hua proves equally indecisive. Two teachers have just been arrested for their political sympathies by the Nationalist authorities, yet Hua is reluctant to sign a petition in protest. When he approaches the administration for housing on campus, the principal of the school tries to turn him into an informer on his

colleagues. He takes the pressure he is feeling out on his wife.

Shopkeeper Xiao begins to speculate on the gold and commodities markets in order to come up with the cash to sublet the entire building from Hou. Hou is also involved in speculative trading in gold and grain ("If you have any problems transporting the grain," he orders an underling, "just say it is a shipment of provisions for the army!").

Mr. Hua's colleagues at school plan a strike to protest the arrest of their fellow teachers. When Mr. Hua tries to go to classes, the principal suspects him of playing dumb and has him arrested as a ringleader, along with most of the other striking teachers. Meanwhile Hou has hired thugs threaten Mr. Kong. They slap him around and break up his apartment in an effort to scare him into moving. Storekeeper Xiao intercedes, asking that they give Kong a week to leave, to which they agree. Mrs. Hua tries in vain to get help for her husband from lawyers, the Ministry of Education, and the arresting military garrison headquarters. Eventually Hou, who works for the Ministry of Defence, agrees to help her, if she will go with him "in person to meet some people." Waiting all night in front of the Department of the Treasury to buy gold with Nationalist banknotes at the official exchange rate, Storekeeper Xiao is roughed-up and kicked out of line by gang members who are trying to control speculation themselves.

Hou takes Mrs. Hua out to a coffee shop, where he attempts to take liberties with her in exchange for promises to help her husband. She flees into the rain. Returning home, Mr. Kong tells her that her small daughter has taken ill. A doctor who has been called to treat the Xiaos examines Hua's daughter and says she needs injections of penicillin, then a costly drug. Her mother despairs when she cannot come up with the money to pay for the medicine. Ah Mei, the maid servant of the Hous, steals a box of penicillin from their chest of drawers and sneaks it to old Mr. Kong. The little girl receives the injections and recovers.

When Shopkeeper Xiao and his wife explain to Hou that they are unable to come up with the money required to lease the building, he confiscates their deposit (all their assets). Hou then orders all the tenants to vacate their apartments immediately facilitate sub-leasing to someone else. Xiao and his wife urge the other tenants to stand up to Hou. In a confrontation on the stairs which is precipitated by the maidservant being beaten by Hou's mistress for stealing the penicillin, the tenants finally defy Hou. A telephone call then comes from a superior in Nanjing ordering Hou to return the large sum of money entrusted to him by the government. Hou decides to flee to Hong Kong with his mistress by plane, rather than face the Nationalists, whom he has cheated, or the Communists, who will soon march into Shanghai.

As he and his mistress flee in the early hours of the

morning, their maidservant is awakened and, in her confusion, cries out: "Thieves!" Old Mr. Kong gets up and confronts Hou in his temporarily stalled auto. Hou threatens to return to Shanghai one day to avenge himself on the whole lot of them. As Hou's car speeds off over a bridge toward Longhua Airport, another car releases Mr. Hua from prison, part of Li Zongren's (the new Nationalist president's) "sham" amnesty. As he limps home, Mr. Hua, who has been tortured in prison, is tailed by a spy.

On Hua's return, the tenants all have a happy reunion. Hua then makes a speech about how much this experience has taught him. He tells the others a new society will soon arrive and that they should all remake themselves.

1. Is it possible to make an allegorical interpretation of this film? What might the apartment building represent?

The building may represent China. The tenants may be the urban classes "allied to the revolution" -- petty entrepreneurs, intellectuals, office personnel (Kong is a proofreader) and servants (we are told Ah Mei will now be free to return to her village and go back to work in the fields). The building is the rightful property of Kong (the same surname as Confucius), but has been expropriated by the opportunist/traitor Hou (Monkey). The struggle is to give the building back to its legitimate owner, who is loved by the tenants, and to the people who live in it.

2. It is said that the movie's ending was tacked on after the Communist victory. Do you think that is so? Why?

One would expect the victors to feel entirely vindicated, not to make a speech about how they are going to have to remake themselves to fit into a new society.