

祝福

Zhùfú (lit. Benediction; usu. trans. "The New Year's Sacrifice")

date: 1956

director: Sang Hu

original short story: Lu Xun (February 7, 1924)

screenplay: Xia Yan

cast (partial): Bai Yang (as Xiang Lin Sao); Wei Heling (He Lao Liu); Li Jingbo (Lu Si Laoye); Shi Lin (Lu Si Taitai)

* * *

The film credits have only a solid background behind them (cf. the ornate collage of images in the credits to "Street Angel"). A quotation from the author, Lu Xun (his profile appears as a relief image on what looks like a fake gold commemorative medal), prefaces the movie, although this quote does not actually come from the short story on which the film's script is based. The quotation urges readers to turn from cruelty, ignorance and superstition. One might assume the film makers are telling us the gist of the movie in advance. Lu Xun, as an author of creative fiction, was usually subtle than this.

A voice informs us that this story begins in a mountain village some forty years back (from 1956), "around the time of the 1911 Revolution" in which the Qing dynasty was overthrown. At the outset, Xiang Lin Sao's husband is dead only six months and her in-laws are already plotting to sell her off in marriage to a man from a more remote location in the mountains (where brides are hard to come by) for a price which they will get. They plan to use the money, in part, to pay the price of a wedding for their youngest son, the brother of her dead husband.

Informed of this plan by her young brother-in-law, Xiang Lin Sao ("Sao" is a respectful form of address for a married woman; Xiang Lin itself means "Auspicious Grove") seeks employment instead as a servant in the Lu family, a scholar-gentry household in town. The patriarch, Lu Si Laoye (Old Fourth Master Lu), has reservations about hiring her because she is a widow. Widows were considered either unlucky or immoral by some sanctimonious persons in those days. But the mistress of the household speaks up on her behalf and she subsequently proves herself a model worker. After serving in the Lu household for some time, she is tracked down by her in-laws who abduct her from the riverside, where she has been sent to wash clothes. Her former mother-in-law, who emerges from the same boat that abducts and confines her, explains to her employers that they need her to work in the fields at home, as they are short hands, but that they will let her return to the Lus once planting is complete. She does not appear at this meeting since she has been forcibly detained in the canopied boat (wupeng chuan) on the river.

Lu Si Laoye, the patriarch, agrees to let them take her, over some mild objections from the mistress of the household.

Bound, gagged and carried up the mountains in a bridal sedan chair, Xiang Lin Sao tries to flee her wedding ceremony. When she is physically prevented from doing so, she deliberately bangs her own head against a table and is knocked unconscious by the strength of her fall. But the marriage ceremony is performed anyway. Her second husband, He Lao Liu, turns out to be a good-hearted man, a debtor who is also victimized by the system. He sympathizes with her and seems innocent of the injustice of the bride-for-sale method by which he has come to marry her. On their wedding night he covers her against the cold and then goes out to sleep on a haystack after he realizes how unhappy she is. When he offers to take her back home, either to the Lu household or to the family of her former mother-in-law, she decides to stay with him.

They work hard, live together happily and have a son, Ah Mao. But no matter how hard he works, He Lao Liu is able only to pay the interest on his loans. One day, after he has already been injured at work, he takes up an offer to work as a "tracker" (la qian de), a coolie who pulls boats with a rope -- a particularly strenuous job. He takes ill afterward. As his creditors hound him on his sickbed, Xiang Lin Sao sends their toddler son Ah Mao out to shell beans. He wanders off after a bird and is killed by a wolf. By the time Xiang Lin Sao returns from having discovered the child's remains (little is left except bloodstains and a slipper) her husband is dead also.

She returns to the Lu household, tells her tragic story to the mistress and is re-employed, although cautioned not to "mope around". Nevertheless, she keeps repeating the story to anyone who will listen: "I was really stupid, really... I only knew that when it snows wild animals come down out of the mountains into the villages foraging for food. I didn't know that they come in spring as well." When it comes time for the ancestral sacrifice, the Lu family does not want her touching any of the implements, so they prepare all the dishes without her, because the ancestors might be unwilling to accept them if they have been touched by someone who is tainted (since two of her husbands have died, she is considered even more immoral/unlucky).

Xiang Lin Sao is then told by another servant that when she dies, because she has had two husbands, she will have to be sawed in half by King Yama of the nether world so that each husband may have at least half a wife. She is then shown an illustration of this in an old book as proof. This terrifies her. Later, when she hears that by donating a large sum of money to the local Tutelary God's Temple to buy a threshold in her name she can atone for her sins in this life and avoid punishment after death (people will step on and over the threshold instead of her body), she hurries to do this, even though the cost, ten strings of cash, is more than a year's wages for her.

Initially overjoyed at having "atoned for her sins," her bubble of euphoria bursts when she is again shunned by the Lu family at the time of the next ancestral sacrifice at the winter equinox. When she protests that she has already made up for her sins by buying the threshold, she is rebuffed by Lu Si Laoye, who tells her no matter how much money she donates, she'll still be unlucky: "You cannot make up for your sins even with a lifetime of atonement!" She talks back to him and is fired.

The household accountant, a man of a lower class than the Lus, seems more sympathetic, asking her gently to leave. She returns to the temple by night and hacks at the threshold with a cleaver until she is driven off by the caretaker.

The next scene shows snow falling. It is again the Lunar New Year. Xiang Lin Sao, now a beggar, looks half dead as she limps along, holding onto a pole. Facing the camera, she queries in a feeble voice: "When a person dies, is there a soul which continues to exist?" Walking on, she stumbles and falls over on the snow-covered road, alone. A voice tells us:

Xiang Lin's Wife, this hard-working, well-intentioned woman collapsed and died after suffering countless depredations and humiliations. This is something that happened over forty years ago. Yes, something which transpired during a bygone era. And fortunately for us, that era is past and will never return again.

1. What differences are there between the short story and the film adaptation?

2. What has become of the narrator in the short story?

-- He is transformed from a self-doubting intellectual who is the person most sensitive to the plight of Xiang Lin Sao to a pontificating voice of authority who makes straightforward, though simplistic, statements.

3. Is this a loss or a gain? Why?

4. Why do you think the story had to be re-written in communist China during the 1950s?

5. In mainland China today people continue to praise this film. Why do you think they do that? Do you think those who praise the film have thoroughly read and understood the story?

6. Which presents the more caustic social indictment, the story or the film? Why?

7. Are there aspects of the film which tend to "orientalize" China? If so, what are they and how did they end up there? Is it Lu Xun who orientalizes China or the Communist scriptwriters? Why would he or they do so? What kind of an ideology is Communism? Think about:

a. the music in the film

b. the gestures and postures of the actors

c. the role of religion/superstition